Transformative Democracy in Educational Leadership and Policy

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Series editors: Stephanie Chitpin, Sharon Kruse and Howard Stevenson

Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice is based on the belief that those in educational leadership and policy-constructing roles have an obligation to educate for a robust critical and democratic polity in which citizens can contribute to an open and socially just society. Advocating for a critical, socially just democracy goes beyond individual and procedural concerns characteristic of liberalism and seeks to raise and address fundamental questions pertaining to power, privilege and oppression. It recognizes that much of what has gone under the name of "transformational leadership" in education seeks to transform very little, but rather it serves to reproduce systems that generate structural inequalities based on class, gender, race, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation.

This series seeks to explore how genuinely transformative approaches to educational leadership, policy, and practice can disrupt the neoliberal hegemony that has dominated education systems globally for several decades, but which now looks increasingly vulnerable. The series will publish high-quality books, both of a theoretical and empirical nature, that explicitly address the challenges and critiques of the current neoliberal conditions, while steering leadership and policy discourse and practices away from neoliberal orthodoxy toward a more transformative perspective of education leadership. The series is particularly keen to "think beyond" traditional notions of educational leadership to include those who lead in educative ways – in social movements and civil society organizations as well as in educational institutions.

Transformative Democracy in Educational Leadership and Policy: Social Justice in Practice

BY

LISA FETMAN

Independent Scholar, USA

AND

LINSAY DEMARTINO

Arizona State University, USA

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Authors

Lisa Fetman, PhD (she/her), is an independent scholar with adjunct faculty appointments at Florida Southern College (Educational Leadership) and the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (Teaching and Learning). Dr. Fetman formerly taught K-12 Spanish in Chicago, Illinois and Tucson, Arizona, working within diverse communities and sociocultural/sociopolitical contexts. Her research encompasses the enactment of education policy within culturally diverse schools, particularly related to the effects of neoliberalism on policy creation, implementation, and disruption. As a former language teacher, she deeply cares about emergent multilinguals, and hence also focuses her scholarship on the intersection of policies and practices within linguistically diverse student populations. Dr. Fetman teaches coursework in diversity and inclusion, curriculum and instruction, culturally responsive leadership, and instructional leadership. She currently resides in Chicago, Illinois, where she commits herself to transforming education policies and practices.

Linsay DeMartino (she/her) is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Leadership & Innovation housed within Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University (ASU). Dr. DeMartino considers herself a scholar-practitioner. She was schooled by various postsecondary institutions across Arizona and educated by the students, families, educators, and community members affiliated with the Mexican-American Studies/Raza Studies program in Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). They changed her life and she will be forever grateful. As a former P-12 educational practitioner in TUSD, Dr. DeMartino served as a special education teacher, inclusion specialist, special education department chair, and as an instructional data and intervention administrative coordinator. Her current research examines transformative actions, equitable community collaboration, and justice-based practices in schools. She is particularly interested in educational practices grounded in just schooling and contextual alternatives rather than "best practices" and educational trends. Dr. DeMartino currently resides in Mesa, Arizona, with her perfectly imperfect puppy, Lorca.

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Preface

Context for This Book

We situate the book within the sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts surrounding education during our contemporary times. As such, we provide a concise, yet comprehensive overview of the sociohistorical milieu impacting education to contextualize this book. Education in the United States has been a democratic project since its founding in the 1700s. According to the Center on Education Policy (2020):

> The Founding Fathers maintained that the success of the fragile American democracy would depend on the competency of its citizens. They believed strongly that preserving democracy would require an educated population that could understand political and social issues and would participate in civic life, vote wisely, protect their rights and freedoms, and resist tyrants and demagogues. Character and virtue were also considered essential to good citizenship, and education was seen as a means to provide moral instruction and build character. (p. 2)

As such, early policymakers worked to create a unified and formal education system, beginning with land grants (or trusted federal lands granted to states) for the creation and maintenance of schools. In some states, boards of education sprouted up, and in Massachusetts, the father of public education, Horace Mann, served as secretary of the state's education board. In the 1830s, Mann advocated for "creation of public schools that would be universally available to all children, free of charge, and funded by the state" (Center on Education Policy, p. 3). His ideas spawned the "common school" movement, wherein all students received instruction in core subjects, such as reading and math.

Previously, despite the federal government's efforts, education remained grossly unequal with wealthy elites having access to literacy and numeracy education, leading to increased access to jobs and wealth. Mann advocated for common schools to serve as the great equalizer in society, as educating poor and middle class children "would prepare them to obtain good jobs…and hereby strengthen the nation's economic position" (Center on Education Policy, 2020). The common school movement laid the groundwork for our current public

education system despite some resistance from elites who did not want to pay for the education of other people's children (Center on Education Policy, 2020).

It is important to understand this brief history of public education in order to see how the American project of democracy is so deeply embedded into our educational system. As such, public education has morphed and adjusted in response to social, historical, cultural, and economic events that affect the US and the democratic project.

According to Alexander (1999), schools are open systems, as they consist of internal structures (the organization itself and people within it) and external structures (the environment, the students, graduates, and staff with lives outside the school). As an open system, school goals, functions, structures, and processes are constantly influenced by a feedback loop of the outside environment, which include social, economic, cultural, and political pressures (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Hence, various shifts in American history have impacted the internal structures of schooling. For example, throughout the course of history, we experienced increased immigration and industrialization throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Civil and World Wars, the Great Depression, the Space Race, the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Women's Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and counterculture, the AIDS epidemic, the internet and tech bubble, social media, the September 11th attacks, the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, Islamophobia, social media, the Great Recession, Barack Obama's election with the Affordable Care Act and the rise of the Tea Party, the legalization of gay marriage, Donald Trump's election, the #MeToo Movement, COVID-19, footage of police murdering Black, Indigenous and/or People of Color (BIPoC), #BlackLivesMatter, and the January 6th attacks have impacted shifts in public education.

As we write this book, we are facing a crisis in public education: A mass exodus from the profession following a global pandemic, low salaries and school budgets following massive cuts during the Great Recession 15 years ago, censorship of curriculum and instruction amid unfounded attacks on critical race theory (CRT) and ethnic studies, and increased scrutiny of public educators from parents, families, and the general public. These phenomena did not occur in a vacuum; these issues have boiled up over hundreds of years given public education's inextricable link with our political democracy.

Hence, we make a case for this book. The project of democracy in education is one that is unfulfilled in many ways, as we have failed to make public education the great equalizer in society. As we face crisis after crisis in education and beyond, we must adjust in such a way that fulfills the democratic process of equality and push forward the notion of equity in schools. As educators, we often work in silos, committed to getting through our curriculum, instruction, and impacting the students in front of us. Meanwhile, political mandates constrict our work, forcing us to focus more and more inward (i.e., the focus on standards and accountability, but more on that in this book!). As educational practitioners and leaders working within the institutions of public education, we have great influence over the trajectory of the institution. As such, in order to impact democracy and education, we must understand that as educators we are agents of democracy. As agents of democracy, we must then understand the roots of democracy in America and

education. Moreover, we present this book to prepare you, the current and aspiring educator, to be not only an agent of democracy, but an agent of transformative, critically just democracy, who impacts the fabric of public education in favor of equity and justice. In this book, you will uncover what democracy in education is, what it is not, and what it could be. In visualizing what is possible in taking on this work, while situating yourself in the current context of public education, you can cause that shift that we so desperately need in the profession.

Structure and Use of This Book

The structure and use of the book is twofold, both reflective and theoretical while situating itself to be utilitarian and practical. As we intend to bridge theory to practice, we structure the book in a way that inspires a reflective, critical practice that is immediately applicable. We front-load discussions of history and theory and buttress these theories with real-world examples from our research data and current events. Additionally, we weave case study data throughout the chapters to provide deeper understanding and an exemplar for your transformative work and include end-of-chapter activities to deepen your knowledge, plan, and implement transformative practices in your school.

In Chapter 1, we present and analyze the history of democracy in education and current social movements that directly impact public education. Then, in Chapter 2, we discuss key theories and concepts that explain impediments to democracy throughout history and today. In the subsequent chapters, we define transformative, critically just democracy in the context of educational leadership and classroom practices and include concrete actions for practicing educators committed to doing this work. Most chapters conclude with activities that prompt you to engage in reflection by applying the key tenets to your practice and experiences. In later chapters, we push further by inviting you to conduct a mini case study situated within your own context, including an adapted equity audit, a transformative practices survey, and a semi-structured interview protocol to collect the voices of your greater school community. In the final chapter, we present an organizing document where aspiring and current school leaders can leverage theory (included in this book) into practice by creating and implementing their action plan. To end this book, we include two appendices, a list of resources where you might find transformative professional development and guest speakers dedicated to equity and justice in schools and a book list to dive deeper into education for social justice as a solitary leader or in community with your fellow educators. We see this book as both a resource and a tool for transformative leadership in preservice programs of study and in practice and we hope you do, as well.

Data Sources and Methods: Two Case Studies

Data woven throughout the chapters derive from case studies conducted at two urban high schools in the Southwest United States: Desert High School and Millennium High School (both pseudonyms).

Desert High School

These data derive from a one-and-a-half year ethnographic investigation at Desert High School (DHS), a large public school in the Southwest that is part of a large, urban school district. DHS has a substantial and unique student population: it serves a significant number of immigrant and refugee students, with over 40 languages and dialects spoken on campus. DHS has consistently received a "C," "D," and even an "F" rating based on the state's school report card system, between 2013 and 2020. In the middle of data collection the school went into a "soft turnaround" in which the administration was replaced, discipline and academic curricula were overhauled, and faculty were given the option to stay or leave. At the time of research, DHS had 1,153 students, with a 20.67% rate of reclassifying students in English Language Development (ELD; i.e., students identified as English Language Learners) into "mainstream" classrooms, 86.35% attendance rate, 82% promotion rate, 5.16% dropout rate, and 57.32% four-year graduation rate (70.5% five-year rate).

We used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) for selecting participants, with the following criterion: participants experience the effects of state and local education policies, particularly policies impacting ELD given its large and diverse population. Data include in-depth interviews with each ELD staff member (six total, including the ELD counselor, the former department chair and current department chair) and school administrators (includes the former principal and assistant principal, and current turnaround principal), and ELD students (currently in ELD and recently excited ELD classes) in one-on-one and focus group settings. Observations during ELD classes (three hours per day, three days per week), and field visits to school functions (e.g., Open House, pep assemblies, faculty meetings, summer meetings) were also included. Lastly, we gave open-ended, anonymous surveys to ELD students to further understand their experiences.

Millennium High School

These data derive from a 19-month critical ethnography at Millennium High School (MHS), a nonprofit, grassroots secondary charter institution located in the Southwest United States. At MHS, there was a five-member administrative team, consisting of an executive director, principal, assistant principal, dean of students, and the college access director. The executive director, principal, and director were the co-founders of the school. In addition, the 21 part-time and full-time faculty and staff were not as diverse as in years past and, at time of study, they were predominately white. As an aggregate, the demographics of the student population was 40–45% Latinx, 45–55% white, and roughly less than 5% Asian American, African American or Black, Native American each.

Various community members in this Southwest city reported that MHS involved faculty, staff, students, and other community members in the decision-making process, including progressive pedagogy, globally oriented curriculum, and inclusive campus policies. Therefore, since "particular settings, persons, or activities [were] selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to [the] questions and goals" a purposive sample was used

(Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). Since this research was grounded in leadership strategies, which pushed the status quo in favor of transformative practices, MHS seemed to be the right fit for this project.

These data sources included archival data, observations, and semi-structured interviews with administrators, faculty, staff, students, parents, and external stakeholders. Archival data collection included student demographics, free and reduced lunch, and educational flags, such as students identified with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans and enrollment numbers for advanced placement courses. In addition, electronic artifacts were gathered, including over 100 social networking posts and 72 weekly email bulletins. Observations, totaling over 80 hours, occurred during various classroom activities, whole school meetings, after school activities, division team meetings, student success team meetings, family nights, school board meetings, and corporate board meetings. Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted, including the executive director (1), the administrative team (3), the faculty and staff (10), students (9), parents/guardians (2), and community stakeholders (2).

Data Analyses

Drawing on these two case studies, we capture what contemporary critically just practices look like and do not look like to illustrate the theories and concepts presented in this book. Both case studies use a critical ethnographic design (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2012) to study phenomena within the schools. Because critical ethnography is "based on critical epistemology, not on value orientations," we approached these studies with beliefs in multiple truths grounded in the individual actor's personalized experiences (Carspecken, 1996, p. 22). Through documenting the participants' beliefs, language, and behaviors, we captured the phenomena that impacted their practices and perceptions, illustrating the concepts presented throughout the text.

Adhering to three of Carspecken's (1996) five recommended stages for analyzing critical ethnographic data, we compiled the primary record (or collection) of data, then engaged in preliminary reconstructive analysis, in which we noted underlying meanings (e.g., pragmatic, semantic, and linguistic structures) in the primary data records and coded for common themes, key issues, and preliminary patterns that emerged, and then compared those to findings to our critical analyses of extant theories, concepts, histories, and policies. We also coded for where and what particular types of power surfaced (relating to institutional logics and neoliberal/neoconservative ideologies – more on these in upcoming chapters). This analytical approach applied to the final stage, dialogical data generation, where we analyzed our records from classroom observations and field notes. Again, we looked for themes related to the location and articulation of power and cultural reproduction. Further, member checks were used to increase credibility and integrity of these interview data. To further protect the welfare of our participants, we expanded our ethical considerations "by protecting their rights, interests, privacy, sensibilities, and offering reports at key stages to participants" (Madison, 2012, p. 24). In this way, validity and trustworthiness were key components of these research studies.

How Can You Use This Book in Your Practice?

As we stated above, we see this book as both a resource and a tool for transformative leadership in preservice and administrative preparation programs of study and in practice. Our end of the chapter activities serve as tools to both supplement undergraduate and graduate courses in preservice and administrator preparation courses, where equity and justice is the crux of the curriculum, and for practicing educators looking to build the foundation for or enhance education for social justice. We recommend that undergraduate instructors use this book and graduate instructors use the content of this book to further students' understanding of transformative practices in favor of critically just education by framing class discussions around a theory into practice model. Additionally, we encourage instructors to use these research data and the end of the chapter activities as a mock case study or as a tool to frame a pilot study for future scholar-practitioners. For our practicing educators, we encourage you to read this in critical reading and dialogue groups. Critical reading and dialogue circles create an opportunity for educators to not only gain knowledge on transformative practices grounded in equity and justice but also to unpack their experiences and feelings in a courageous space (Fetman & DeMartino, unpublished manuscript). Further, by participating in this critical reading space, educators are more likely to develop an authentic understanding and belief in equitable opportunities with educational spaces and beyond becoming advocates who are willing to stand up for and speak out on these efforts (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). As scholar-practitioners always learning and growing, we hope you find this book both informative and thought provoking leading to critically just educational systems and a more humanizing world for our present and future students and families.

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