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Transformative Urban Education Leaders in Los Angeles

Sarah Figueroa
Loyola Marymount University, sarahfig76@gmail.com

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Transformative Urban Education Leaders in Los Angeles

by

Sarah Figueroa

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Transformative Urban Education Leaders in Los Angeles

Loyola Marymount University
School of Education
Los Angeles, CA 90045

This dissertation written by Sarah Figueroa, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

_____ *April 6, 2018*

Date

Dissertation Committee

Shane P. Martin, Ph.D., Committee Member

Ernesto Colin, Ph.D., Committee Member

Drew Furedi, Ed.D., Committee Member

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DEDICATION

I would first like to dedicate this achievement to my grandparents, Ignacio and Maria de Jesus Guerrero, who sacrificed more than I will ever know in order to provide our family with a life of opportunity in this country. Although I deeply miss their presence in the physical world, our family is a constant reminder that they live in our midst.

To my parents, Maria and Humberto Figueroa--I hope this achievement completes the dream you had for me so many years ago when you made the choice to provide me with the best education you could. I understand now, more than ever, the magnitude of your sacrifices.

To my loudest cheerleaders—my sisters, brothers, sisters-in-law, and brother-in-law, I have a lot of making up to do after all these years of being away (physically and mentally) for school. To my nieces and nephews, I can't wait for all the success that lies ahead of you! Know that I will *always* do *everything* I can to support you in pursuing your dreams.

To my very big, loud, loving family, the Guerreros—I wouldn't trade you all for the world! Thank you for being the "home" I can always come back to for replenishment! Finally, to the loves of my life, Michael and Noah, my life is filled with so much happiness because you two are in it. Sweetie, your needs have often been put temporarily on hold so that I could take the time I needed to go to class, read, research, and write. There are no words that fully capture the how much I love and appreciate you for giving me the space to do this--this achievement is only the beginning of things we have to celebrate as a family! To my Noah, you have changed the way I define love and happiness simply by your presence. Because of you, my life has new purpose, and it is this: to love you unconditionally, to support you in realizing your

biggest dreams, and to nurture your God-given talents so that you can make your own unique

mark on this world!

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The job of an education system-level leader in urban environments is becoming more demanding, and the environment in which they operate more complex. Filling these very critical roles with individuals who possess the right characteristics could mean the difference between success and failure at improving the educational outcomes of students who are more often than not students of color and economically disadvantaged students.

Through seven interviews, this qualitative study focused on understanding the leadership dispositions that contributed to the success of transformative urban education system-level leaders in Los Angeles. The new *transformative urban education leadership framework* was developed using elements from each of the following existing frameworks: leadership for multicultural education, transformative leadership, and leadership for social justice. Findings from the data revealed four themes and two subthemes that described the characteristics that these transformative education leaders in urban Los Angeles had in common. The four themes were early experiences that impacted future trajectory, power of positive communication, forming deep relationships with the community, collaborative decision-making and teambuilder; the subthemes were communicating beliefs and vision, communicating hope, and communicating

courage. These themes and subthemes suggest some positive alignment to the new *transformative urban education leadership framework*.

Los Angeles education organizations could develop their own pipeline of top-level leaders who are prepared to assume positions when the opportunities present themselves, elevate the role of community-based organizations (and community), and be more targeted in their recruitment and professional development strategies for existing transformative leaders.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the better part of the last 18 years, I have held many professional positions across the K–16 public education and policy spectrum, working to improve educational outcomes for students in urban communities. More often than not, the students and families in those communities were overwhelmingly Latino and African American. Whether I was working with the school district to build new schools to relieve gross overcrowding or helping to draft statewide education legislation, I regularly came upon one challenge: great leader(s) I worked with would transition out prior to completing their agenda or developing a succession plan. This gap created a vacuum of historical knowledge, the loss of deep relationships with critical stakeholders, strong visions for the work in progress, and the shortage of a leader who had the ability to inspire and motivate groups of people to work on improving educational outcomes for California's most impacted communities.

My interest in wanting to better understand why transformative leaders in urban public education stay is three-fold. First, students and families who have been historically underserved deserve consistent leadership and visionaries who believe in their success, who are committed to ensuring that the highest quality teaching takes place in their classrooms, and to the improvement of their communities. Second, the field of education needs consistent leadership with deep contextual and historical understandings of the landscape in order to provide guidance and direction. Third, perhaps selfishly, a strong group of transformative leaders would provide budding professionals like myself with guidance and professional development.

Statement of the Problem and the Connection to Social Justice

Previous research indicates that stability in top-level leadership improves the success of education reforms (Hess, 1999). In a district like the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), where the increasingly complex role of system leaders requires that they lead in the areas of instruction, facilities, finance, politics, community engagement, and vision setting, having stable transformative leaders is of paramount importance. The LAUSD, however, has been characterized by frequent turnover of top leadership. Since 1853, the Los Angeles Unified School District has had 50 superintendents (including interim assignments). The longest tenure of the 50 was 11 years by two superintendents between 1895–1906 and 1937–1948. In the last 25 years, LAUSD has seen nine superintendents—only two of those remaining in their positions for more than 3 years (J. Craine, personal communication, November 4, 2015). Frequent turnaround is also commonplace at the school board level, where members are publicly elected to 4-year terms.

Organizations external to the Los Angeles Unified School District also play a critical role in advocating on behalf of the students, families, and communities. In 2013, a new coalition of eight community groups and education-related organizations banded together to form Communities for Los Angeles Student Success (CLASS), whose mission it is to close the achievement gap in LAUSD. Collectively, this group represents 115,000 students, teachers, parents, health advocates, foster youth organizations, and other community members. Although each of the participating organizations existed long before 2013, this unique coalition was new to the Los Angeles education community (Sacks, 2013).

It is my hope that this research not only provides additional insight into understanding transformative urban education leaders in Los Angeles, but that the data will inform the selection and development of future leaders. We, as educators, have an obligation to ensure that (a) our most impacted student populations are served well academically, which will provide them the skillsets they need to access knowledge, increase earning potential, and participate fully in our democracy, and that (b) we work toward equity throughout the education system. Accomplishing this not only respects the rights of our students, but also empowers communities of color through the amplification of voices that have been left out of the public dialogue.

Research Question

This study's research question is, Despite great challenges, what leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs contribute to the success of transformative leaders in K–12 urban public education settings in Los Angeles?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is threefold: To understand, from the viewpoint of the leaders, the leadership dispositions that contribute to their success in the urban education space; to understand, from the leader perspective, the driving force behind their work; and, finally, to test a theoretical framework for transformative K–12 urban public education system-level leaders. System-level leaders are those in the highest positions in their organization or school district (e.g., superintendent, executive director, chief executive officer, school board member, etc.).

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this study, I synthesized aspects of the following frameworks to develop a new framework specific to transformative urban education system leaders: leadership

for multicultural education, transformative leadership, and leadership for social justice. Transformative urban education leadership is applicable for system-level leaders who (a) work to foster democratic and dialectic environments; (b) maintain a moral obligation to challenge the status quo by actively critiquing internal and external structures, behaviors, and dispositions; (c) acknowledge and have a deep understanding of the power dynamics at play; (d) embrace the moral obligation to articulate a vision that is counter to the status quo; and (e) while maintaining a vision for all students to succeed, focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups. This leader leveraged these characteristics in order to create asset-based, antiracist, and antibiased education communities that maintain high expectations and rigorous standards for all students— especially those from underserved and marginalized communities.

Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a qualitative design using multiple case studies as the means to collect data and frame the research. I was interested in understanding the characteristics of top-level leaders in urban education. As a result of the complexity of this reality, case studies as my methodology was most appropriate. Yin (2014) stated that case study as a research approach is appropriate when, among other aspects, the research question requires an "extensive and 'in-depth' description of some social phenomenon" (p. 4). Using this method allowed me to explore the top-level leaders' experience holistically and more thoroughly, as the focus of the study not only involved individuals, but also took into consideration the complex environments in which they operated.

The study focused on (a) the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest school district in the United States; and (b) the external education-related organizations that

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support the students and families of LAUSD. Over the last 50 years, the district has experienced many challenges. Yet, despite the constant barrage of difficulties, some system leaders are drawn to Los Angeles and *choose* to serve there. Others have spent most of their careers in the Los Angeles Unified School District and will continue to serve until their retirement.

Purposeful sampling, a selection method that involves selecting participants according to the needs of the study, is commonly used in qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patten, 2005) in that the researcher chooses participants who give a richness of information that is suitable for detailed research (Patton, 1980). Criteria for participant selection were as follows: the participants were selected because (a) they have been leaders directly involved or have led major K–12 initiatives or programs in Los Angeles during the last 20 years; (b) there is consensus in the community that their work has been successful and impactful; and (c) they have a generally positive reputation in the education space. The participants were all current leaders or retired leaders, and were selected without regard to gender. I conducted interviews with seven leaders who have held, or are currently holding, senior-level leadership positions at both LAUSD and/or external education-related organizations in the Los Angeles area.

As the primary method of data collection, interviews were conducted in what Rubin and Rubin (2012) term *responsive interview,* which emphasizes the importance of building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interview that facilitates a flexible conversation. Thematic analysis is a method proposed for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes found in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patten, 2005). The process includes organizing data, describing it in detail, and interpreting it. This method, according to Flick (2014), is

compatible with various epistemological and theoretical conceptualizations, as it is founded on analyzing subjective viewpoints and on data coming from interviews.

Limitations and Delimitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, the sample included seven top-level leaders in Los Angeles. The findings, therefore, are generalizable only to this setting and to this specific set of organizations. Secondly, there is little to no prior research on this topic and no research that focuses on Los Angeles top-level education leaders. Next, since the data was self-reported, much of it cannot be independently verified. Finally, access to participants was limited by geography, timeframe of the study, and system requirements.

The delimitations of the study are as follows:

1. The criteria applied in the identification and selection process of the participants is based on subjective community consensus about the participants' level of success and impact in the K–12 education in Los Angeles.

2. The sample includes participants I had access to within the timeframe allotted for the study.

3. The sample only included the top-level leader. Direct reports were not included in the study to corroborate the self-reported data provided.

Despite the limitations and delimitations listed above, this research has the potential to be a platform on which to build upon in the future.

Summary

My decision for choosing to conduct my research on this topic and within the confines of Los Angeles, specifically, is a personal one. Having been born and raised in this area, I feel a

personal responsibility to contribute to the improvement of educational outcomes for students whom I believe have been not served well by our system—and who also happen to be overwhelmingly economically disadvantaged and either African American or Latino/a. An educational system as big as the one in Los Angeles cannot thrive without strong internal and external leadership guiding it in the right direction. My hope is that this study will contribute to the identification of transformative leadership capacities, resulting in the selection of leaders who will ensure the success of *all* students.

The next chapter includes a review of the research on the Los Angeles Unified School District and external organizations. The challenges plaguing LAUSD and the Los Angeles education landscape will be presented in order to provide context for the environments that top-level leaders must operate within. Chapter 2 also includes an analysis of the related literature on three leadership frameworks used to develop a new framework used for this study.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND TOWARD A NEW FRAMEWORK OF LEADERSHIP

At a time when the job of an education system leader is becoming more demanding and complex, and with the implementation of new initiatives and reforms, filling the leadership role with individuals who possess the right characteristics could mean the difference between success and failure at improving the educational outcomes of hundreds of thousands of school children. An added layer of complexity is presented when that system leader is operating in an urban public education environment, where the challenges are unique and complex, and require skillsets that match the complexity of the work. In addition to assuming the role of instructional chief, visionary, facility manager, and fiscal agent, top-level leaders need to be politicos, change-agents, negotiators, and community organizers.

Although the research on effective system leadership is constantly growing, today's scholars have yet to agree on a set of comprehensive characteristics that transformative urban education leaders should possess to successfully meet the needs of students in urban public-school settings. For the purpose of this literature review, I will focus on the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the external organizations that support Los Angeles's students and families.

Given the growing number of challenges within the LAUSD, the number of students it serves each day, and the demographic profile of its students, finding the most effective leader to guide the system—within an incredibly complex environment—is of paramount importance. Research conducted by Boyd, Kerchner, and Blyth (2008) exposed a school district in Los Angeles that is in persistent crisis, and one that has lost legitimacy in the minds of most citizens.

This review seeks to answer the following question: Despite great challenges, what leadership dispositions contribute to the persistence of transformative leaders in K–12 urban, public education settings in Los Angeles?

In this chapter, I provide a contextual overview of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). This overview includes a description of some of the challenges that have plagued the LAUSD including declining enrollment, student achievement, unpredictable budgets, the political landscape, multiple reforms, and leadership turnover. The intention for this section is to provide an understanding of the complex environment that top-level leaders in Los Angeles must operate within. Although I am not attempting to claim that smaller school systems are devoid of challenges, the compounded challenges work to create a unique setting for leaders.

The next section introduces a new theoretical framework for transformative urban education leadership that has been applied to this study, beginning with a review of the literature on multicultural education as the foundation for the framework, followed by the evolution of transformative leadership theory, and concluding with a description of characteristics most critical for leaders of social justice.

LAUSD Contextualized

At the time of this study, the Los Angeles Unified School District's total 2017–2018 K–12 enrollment is 618,970, which is second only behind the New York City Department of Education. According to the 2017–2018 LAUSD Fingertip Facts (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2017) released by the district in October 2017, 74% of the student population is characterized as Latino, followed by 9.8% White, 8.4% African American, and 6% Asian. As of August 2017, the Los Angeles Unified School District employed a total of 60,240 certificated

and classified employees. The district covers an area totaling 710 square miles, which includes most of the city of Los Angeles and all or portions of 26 cities and unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. The 2017–2018 school year budget for LAUSD is $7.52 billion.

Since the late 1960s, a consistent number of challenges have plagued the district. In spite of these, however, there are senior-level leaders that have chosen to persist in their roles in various capacities at LAUSD. For the purpose of this literature review, I focused on six of the most critical challenges LAUSD is facing. They are as follows: declining enrollment, student achievement, unpredictable budgets, the political landscape, multiple reforms and, more broadly, leadership turnover.

Student Achievement Challenges

In California, the Department of Education (CDE) administers standardized assessments in a variety of ways, which model and promote high-quality teaching and student learning to set a course to ensure that all California students are well prepared to enter college and careers in today's competitive global economy (California Department of Education, 2015a). Up until June 30, 2013, the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program was administered each spring to students in Grades 2 through 11. The STAR Program looked at how well schools and students were performing in math, reading, writing, science, and history through results from four tests: the California Standards Tests (CST), the California Modified Assessment, the California Alternate Performance Assessment, and the Standards-Based Tests in Spanish. STAR results were reported using five performance levels: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic. Performance levels describe pupil achievement on the California content standards (California Department of Education, 2015b, 2015c). For the purpose of this section,

the California Standards Tests or CSTs, which are criterion-referenced tests that assess the California content standards, are used to report LAUSD student achievement. The Data Quest website reports the Los Angeles Unified School District's results for the 2013 CSTs, which is the last year prior to this study that results are available for these assessments (California Department of Education, 2013).

Results from the last administration of the CSTs revealed achievement rates that indicate that, at best, the majority of the district's students are not demonstrating proficiency in the three major subject areas. In a district where over 82% of its students are Latino/a and African American, this also means that the majority of these students are not achieving at the academic levels that would prepare them for success. English-language arts (see Figure 1) was highest at the fourth grade with 58% of students demonstrating proficiency or advanced proficiency. The percentage of students who demonstrated equal proficiency drops from the fourth grade through the 11th grade, where 40% of students achieved proficiency or advanced proficiency. Results from the 2013 Mathematics CST (Figure 2) show increases between the second grade, where proficiency or advanced proficiency is at 57%, to the fourth grade, where 70% of the students demonstrated similar results. However, math scores begin to drop in each of the subsequent grade levels through seventh grade, where 39% of students who took the test scored proficient or advanced. For the same year, in Algebra I (Figure 3), similarly, students who took the test in the seventh grade achieved 81% proficiency or advanced proficiency. Scores then drop dramatically to 40% in the eighth grade, 16% in ninth grade, 10% in 10th grade, and finally 8% proficient or advanced in the 11th grade.
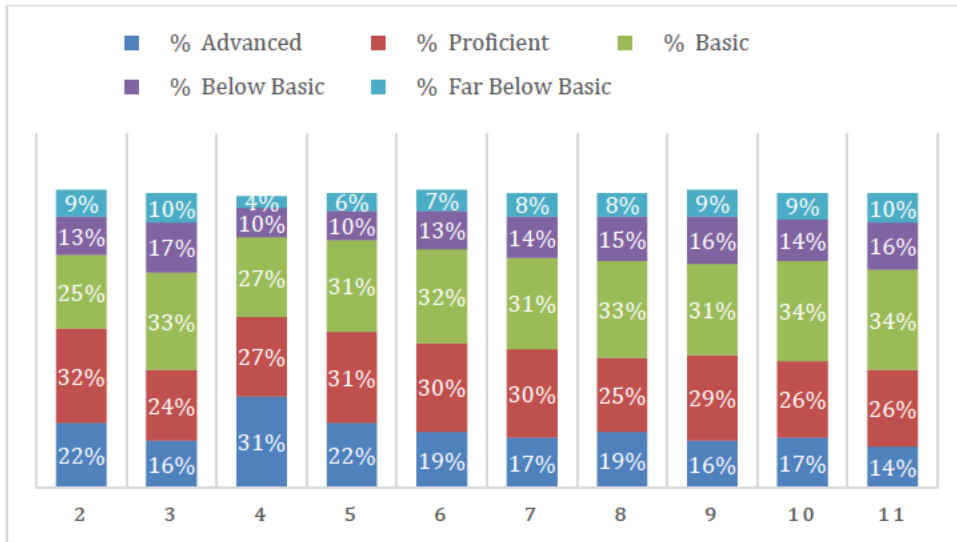
Figure 1. 2013 LAUSD CST English-language arts results by grade. Adapted with permission from California Department of Education, 2013a.
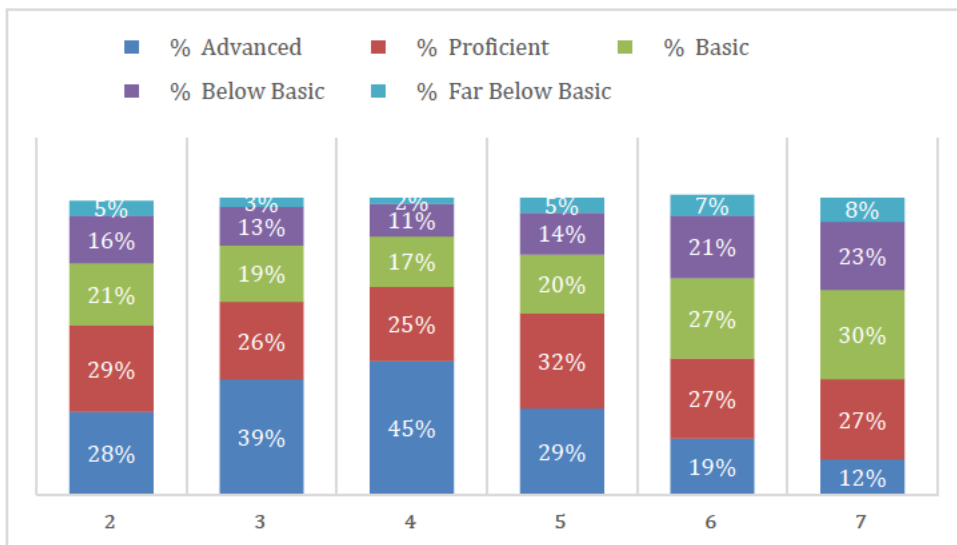
Figure 2. 2013 LAUSD CST mathematics results by grade. Adapted with permission from California Department of Education, 2013a.
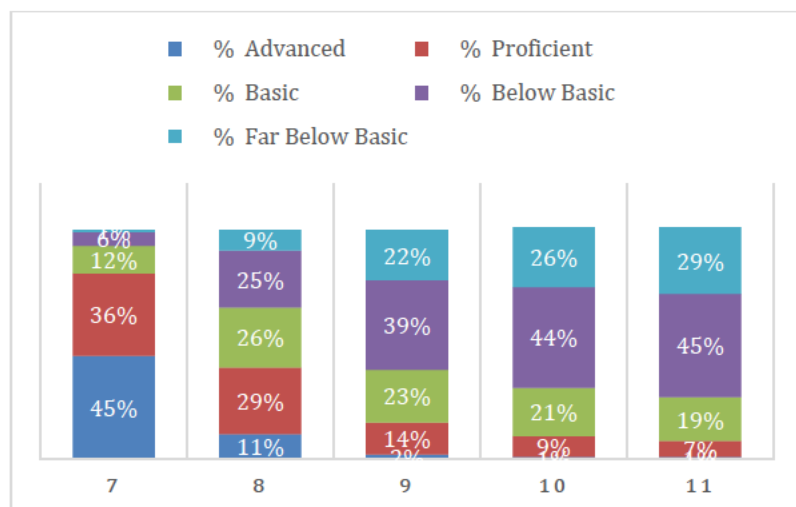
Figure 3. 2013 LAUSD CST algebra I results by grade. Adapted with permission from California Department of Education, 2013a.

On July 1, 2013, the STAR program was replaced by the computer-adaptive California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) System, which encompasses the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments and aims to assess proficiency on the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics. During the Spring 2014 in LAUSD, students in eligible grades participated in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) Field Test Scores for this SBA assessment pilot year were not reported to the district, and therefore, field test results were not useable. The results from the 2014–2015 CAASPP administration were, therefore, used as baseline data for the subsequent years of testing It is important to note a few major differences between the previous assessment administration of the CSTs and the new CAASPP assessments.

First, students in the Los Angeles Unified School District took the adaptive computer-based test on tablets, with no paper and pencil, no bubbles to fill in, and no multiple choice questions, as had been the case with the CSTs Taking computer-adapted tests means that the

questions are tailored to individual abilities—if the student gets questions correct, the questions get tougher, and if they miss them, the questions get easier. The new assessment also includes graphics that require students to "drag and drop" on the computer screen, requiring students to show how they arrived at an answer through evidence of their computation, as opposed to selecting an answer from the given options as was the case with the CSTs. Each of these changes requires that students learn new skills in order to complete the assessments. These include writing on a tablet (for LAUSD), typing answers on a keyboard, and listening on headphones before answering questions. When asked to comment on the 2015 baseline SBA results, LAUSD's Executive Director of the Office of Data and Accountability Cynthia Lim, Ph.D., admitted that the scores were "lower than what we've seen in the past in terms of what we would say is proficiency" (Szymanski, 2015, para. 4).

The California Department of Education's CASPP results webpage confirmed Dr. Lim's comment regarding the decline in proficiency across the board for LAUSD students (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2015). The English language arts/literacy CAASPP results in Figure 4 showed that in 2016–2017, 60.4% of the district's students did not meet the standard level. It also shows nearly no growth from the 2015–2016 administration of the test and only a 6.6% improvement since the 2014–2015 school year.

Results on the mathematics portion of the test (see Figure 5) were overall lower than the English language arts/literacy scores. Just over 70% of students did not meet the standard level, which was only about a 1% overall growth from the year prior and a 5% improvement from the 2014–2015 test results.

The results for economically disadvantaged students in 2016–2017 show lower proficiency scores in each year and in each subject area than the general student body. In 2016–2017, 66% did not meet the standard in English language arts/literacy, and 75.6% did not meet standards in mathematics.
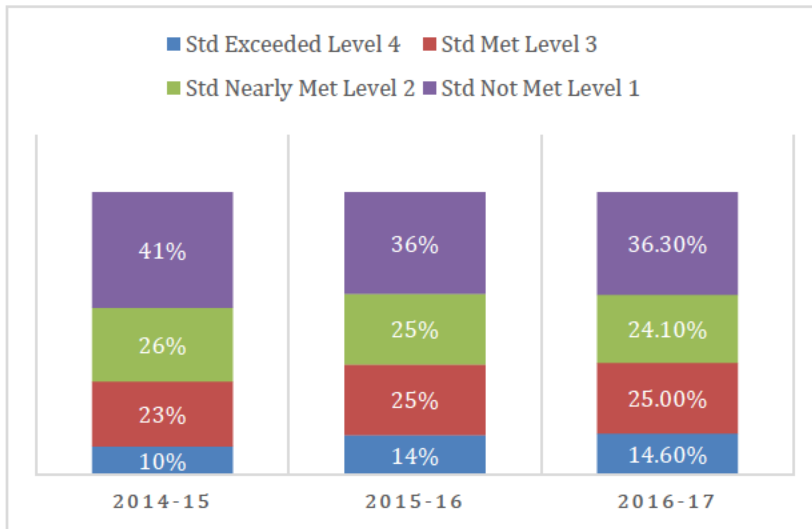
Figure 4. LAUSD CAASPP ELA/literacy results. Adapted from Source: http://www.ed-data.org/district/Los-Angeles/Los-Angeles-Unified
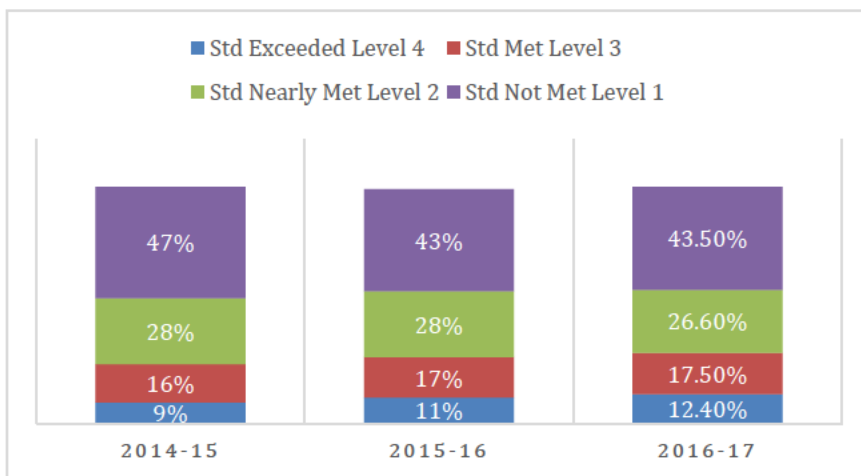
Figure 5. LAUSD CAASPP mathematics results. Adapted from http://www.ed-data.org/district/Los-Angeles/Los-Angeles-Unified

Budget Challenges

Declining enrollment. Total K–12 enrollment in LAUSD for the 2017–2018 school year (the year this study was conducted) is 618,970. This number is inclusive of students in independent charter schools authorized by LAUSD, whose total enrollment has been increasing annually to a high of 154,705 in the 2016–2017 school year (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2017**).** Since reaching its peak during the 2002–2003 school year, at 746,831, enrollment in LAUSD schools has declined each year. According to LAUSD, decline in enrollment is attributed to several factors, including the reduced birth rate in Los Angeles County and the increasing cost of living, including housing, in Southern California (Los Angeles Unified School District, n.d.). Another contributing factor to the declining enrollment is the percentage of students enrolled in independent charter schools. The chart below shows the increase in the number of students enrolled in independent charter schools over the past decade. In contrast, the district's total K–12 enrollment has declined over the same period. (See Figure 6)
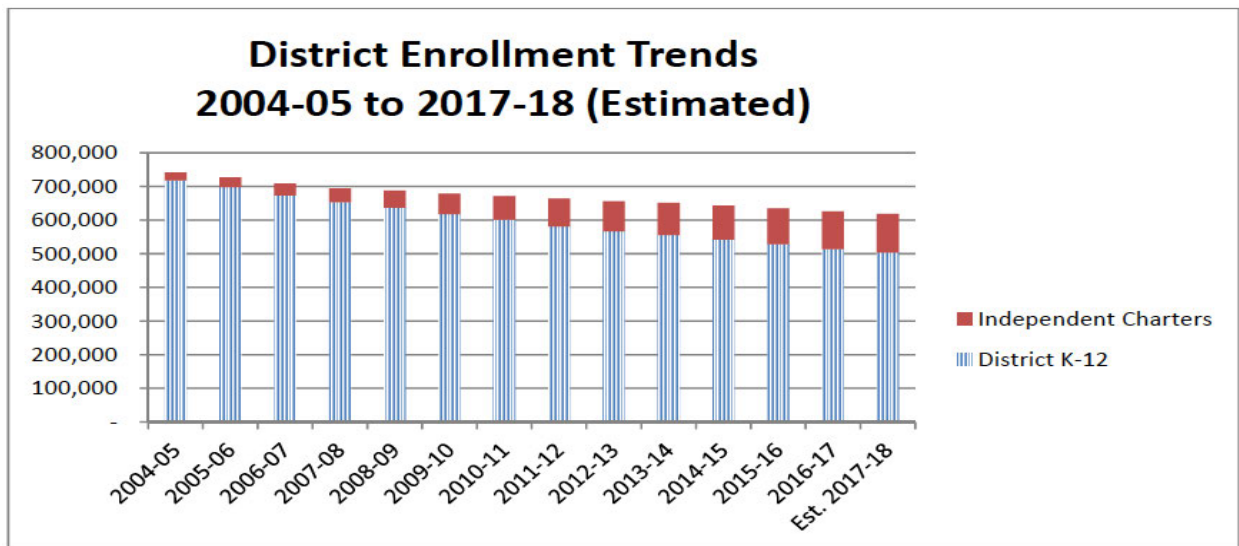
Figure 6 District enrollment trends 2004 to 2017–2018. Source: LAUSD 2017–2018 superintendent's final budget.

Charter schools. The combined result of the demographic shifts briefly described above, coupled with the increase of enrollment in charter schools, is most felt by the district through the decrease of revenues, in spite of continued expenditure obligations district-wide. The Los Angeles Unified School District has authorized more charters than any other Local Educational Agency (LEA) in California—224 independent charter schools are in operation for the 2017–2018 school year (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2017). With a total enrollment of 154,705 in 2016–2017, the steady increase over more than a decade directly impacts the decline in enrollment in LAUSD schools, and thereby negatively affects the district's annual per-pupil revenue. As long as parents continue to exercise their choice to leave LAUSD and enroll their children in independent public charter schools, the district's annual per-pupil revenue will continue to be negatively impacted (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2015a).

Charter schools in California came into existence in 1992, when then-governor Pete Wilson signed into law SB 1448, known as the Charter Schools Act of 1992. That legislation, the second of its kind in the nation, allowed the establishment of schools that would be freed from most district and state education regulations. The intention of the law, as stated in California Education Code (EC) 47601, was in part to:

- Improve pupil learning;
- Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods;
- Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public-school system;
- Hold the schools established under this part accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes; and

- Provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.

The idea of developing charters in LAUSD was opposed by some, but none with greater intensity than the district's teachers' union, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) Opposition, however, could not stop the arrival of charter schools in LAUSD. The year after the passage of SB 1448, LAUSD had 14 charter schools that enrolled nearly 13,000 students. In 2006, 103 charter schools operated within the LAUSD boundaries, and by the 2016–2017 school year, that number had grown to 279 charter schools with enrollments totaling over 154,000 students (California Department of Education, n.d.).

According to Kerchner, Menefee-Libey, Mulfinger, and Clayton (2008), LAUSD sees charters as both a threat and an opportunity. After adopting some charter-like reforms, particularly for their large, comprehensive high schools, three of the district's highest performing high schools decided to leave altogether and convert into independent charters. In 2003, then-superintendent Roy Romer said of the conversion of Palisades, Granada Hills, and San Fernando Valley High School to charters, "I take this present method as a very serious threat to the whole district" (p. 189). The goal to increase the number of charters was explicitly stated by the California Charter School's Association (2015) and has been echoed by other charter advocates like Netflix founder Reed Hastings, who stated,

> One way to permanently impact the system would be to have 10 to 20% of California school children enrolled in charter schools. That would be critical mass, and enough of a force to induce a competitive dynamic in the system. (p. 196)

State budget cuts. Los Angeles Unified School District leaders have experienced budget challenges since the 2009–2010 school year, which have had severe impacts on both program and staff. According to a budget presentation before the school board in April 2011, entitled *LAUSD: The Reality of a Budget in Crisis*, since 2009–2010, the district had had cut $1.5 billion from its budget, which manifested in furlough days taken by over 68,000 employees over 2 years, a reduction in pay, and work hours for over 10,700 classified positions, the elimination of over 10,500 certificated and classified positions, and layoffs for 4,900 other certificated and classified employees (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2011).

The following year, on November 7, 2012, Section 36 was added to the California Constitution, immediately following the voter-approved tax incremental increase via Proposition 30, Article XIII. This provision imparted additional education revenues that would directly impact the revenue received by LAUSD from the state, and thus provided some much-needed relief to the extreme budget cuts of the years prior. The years following the passage of Proposition 30 would bring more budget reform measures that would begin to close the funding gap in the district. This increase is reflected in subsequent years' approved budgets.

In its most recent budget approval for the 2017–2018 school year, the Los Angeles Unified School District board approved a $7.5-billion budget that sought to increase spending on expanding programs like the magnet program; however, the district planned on laying off more than 100 library aides, clerks, and other support staff in the next school year. The layoffs, according to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, were being implemented as a direct result of the district's declining student enrollment numbers (Blume & Phillips, 2017). In a few years, the district was expecting to have a large deficit to manage. Although in 2015, an independent panel

predicted a $600 million deficit by 2019–2020, that number was adjusted to reflect a possible deficit of $422 million in 2019. At the time of this study, LAUSD has yet to communicate its plans to close that deficit (Phillips, Blume, Kohli, Resmovits, & Kohli, 2017).

Local control funding formula. On July 1, 2013, California governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. signed historic school funding legislation that represented a major shift in how California funds Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). For nearly 40 years, California had relied on a system that included general purpose funding (known as revenue limits) and more than 50 tightly defined categorical programs to provide state funding to LEAs. The new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) directed increased resources to the state's neediest students and restored local control over how money is spent at the school-site level. The previously complex, inefficient, and inequitable finance system California employed distributed school funding using "categorical" grants, which were complex state mandates that limited how funds could be used. The new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), however, shifted the distribution to (a) per-pupil base; (b) supplemental and concentration grants for English learners, students from low-income families, and foster youth; and (c) a concentration grant for districts with over 55% of this targeted population. The 2013–2014 Budget Act provided just over $2 billion for school districts and charter schools to support the first-year implementation of the LCFF. Ongoing funding was set to provide LEAs with roughly the same amount of funding they received in 2012–2013 plus an additional amount each year to bridge the gap between current funding levels and the new LCFF target levels, scheduled to be reached in 8 years (California Department of Education, 2013b; State of California, 2013; Los Angeles Unified School District, 2015b).

The new California funding formula replaced complexity in favor of equity, transparency, and performance. As part of the LCFF, school districts and charter schools are required to develop, adopt, and annually update a 3-year Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) that will set annual goals and describe how the local agency would use available resources. The plan also requires that goals are identified and progress is measured for student subgroups across eight state priority areas: basic conditions of learning, state standards, parental involvement, pupil achievement, pupil engagement, school climate, course access, and other pupil outcomes. As part of the development, revision, and updating process for the plan, LEAs must, among other requirements, obtain parent, student, teacher, principal, administrator, and public input (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2015c; State of California, 2013). The development process of LAUSD's 2016–2017 LCAP and 2015–2016 community update included 53 meetings with stakeholders. Engagement included website, email, word of mouth, a community survey, and meetings where 2,222 stakeholders and 30 groups in total were engaged (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2016).

Although this historic legislation increased the amount of money being funneled to the schools, system leaders continue to be faced with budget challenges. Unfunded liabilities for retiree benefits, increasing health insurance costs, and collectively bargained wage increases will require the leadership of the district to make some difficult choices in the near future.

Political Landscape

School board. A seven-member elected school board runs the Los Angeles Unified School District. This governance structure has been fraught with challenges for decades. First, expansive residential patterns have historically made political organizing for elections difficult in

Los Angeles, a problem exacerbated by students' frequent moves. Nevertheless, in spite of the

White population slipping to minority status in the district after 1970, White political leaders and

voters continued to control the district's board and superintendency. Until 1979, the LAUSD

school board was elected at-large and retained a White majority through the 1980s, in large part

because White constituents were more likely to vote in the district's historically low-turnout

elections. As a result of these patterns, many White voters were reluctant to vote for an increase

in taxes, which were needed to build new schools and finance the growing responsibilities of the

district despite increases in enrollment throughout the 1950s and 1960s. White voters also

elected cautious school board members who were unwilling to deal with the segregation issues of

the district (Kerchner et al., 2008). The segregation of the schools, however, was the motivation

for many would-be political leaders to consider running for school board.

In 1965, Reverend James Jones won the election as the only Black member of the

LAUSD school board (he was defeated after one 4-year term), but as a result of the at-large

system of electing school board members, disproportionate power continued to be granted to

White voters. Opportunities for African Americans to exercise their "voice" through

conventional L.A. political channels were sharply limited until the election of Mayor Tom

Bradley in 1973 (Kerchner et al., 2008). The situation for Latinos was similar to that of African

Americans in Los Angeles. Despite pervasive discrimination and segregated schools, Mexican

American families' commitment to the education of their children resulted in early enrollment in

schools. Despite early successes with lawsuits challenging segregation in 1931 in the town of

Lemon Grove near San Diego, and then again in 1946 in the town of Westminster in Orange

County, Latinos' opportunity for influence through elected offices was restricted by their

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minimal representation on the Los Angeles City Council and LAUSD at-large school board elections. However, following passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, the demographics shifted greatly. Julian Nava won the election as the school board's first Latino member in 1967 and served until 1980. During that same timeframe, the Latino student population began to outnumber that of both White and African American students in LAUSD schools. However, despite the fact that Latinos comprised a majority of all students by 1984, it was not until after the city council mandated that the lines be redrawn in 1993, that there would be more than one Latino on the seven-member board (Kerchner et al., 2008).

In 1999, following several failed reform initiatives, the resignation of Superintendent Sid Thompson, and the death of a well-liked United Teachers Los Angeles president, the strategy to secure school board seats shifted from increasing voter turnout by ethnic groups to activating powerful coalitions through the formation of political action committees that recruited a slate of challengers to replace the four board seats up for reelection. These challengers were, essentially, the reform party in the nonpartisan election (Kerchner et al., 2008). During that campaign, the *LA Times* asked candidates if they thought LAUSD was in crisis. Most incumbents, except for David Tokofsky, denied that the district was in ruins; the challengers and the general public, however, strongly disagreed Genethia Hayes, Caprice Young, Yolie Flores Aguilar, and Mike Lansing responded with, "Absolutely," "I don't think people on the board really, fully comprehend the depth of the crisis," "Severely in a crisis," and "Yes," respectively (as cited in Kerchner et al., 2008, p. 171). In that election, three of the four challengers won—and David Tokofsky, the only current member who agreed the district was in crisis, was also the only incumbent who remained on the board (as cited in Kerchner et al., 2008).

A similar strategy was employed by then–Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, when, in 2007, he recruited and endorsed a slate of school board candidates who would support his approach to reforming the district. That school board election was considered the most expensive school board election in history, in which two of the candidates in the four races spent more than $1 million on their campaigns. After prevailing in May 2007, the mayor's candidates became part of a four-member majority on the seven-member school board (Kerchner et al., 2008).

The strategy employed since 1999 has not changed. School board seats have become more politicized and divisive as the stakes continued to increase. Oftentimes, hostile relationships between the reform movement or the teachers' union have played themselves out on the public stage during school board elections. The resulting, often divided, school board with conflicting priorities and visions for the district, presents a significant challenge to both senior leadership and the superintendent who ultimately reports to the elected board.

Union relations. Teachers' unions are often characterized as ardent opponents of school reform, except when it comes to reforms that do not challenge contract parameters (Hess, 1999). In 1968, United Teachers Los Angeles was formed through a merger of the American Federation of Teachers Local 1021, and the district's National Education Administration (NEA) affiliate. Just 2 years later, UTLA went on a strike that crippled the school district for 5 weeks. The strike ended when the district agreed to a contract that gave teacher representatives some provisions that granted them a seat at the table with regard to the operations of the district. Although the agreement was later nullified in the courts, the strike established the union as both muscular and antagonistic. Even though the union would gain substantial influence with the school board as a

result of its electoral support, it was not accepted as a working partner in educational reform (Kerchner et al., 2008).

In 1989, nearly 20,000 LAUSD teachers would once again engage in a bitter strike, seeking higher wages and more administrative control. After a period of chaos in the district, the strike ended with the signing of a contract that increased teacher salaries by 24%, part of which was rolled back when the recession of the early 1990s hit (Kerchner et al., 2008). Among some of the other "wins" for teachers were the elimination of yard duty, an addition of 40 minutes of paid preparatory time, and some shared-decision-making policies that would grant teachers and other stakeholders at local schools control over small matters. UTLA not only gained power with teachers following the strike, it also experienced victories in the school board race that took place less than 2 weeks after the strike ended. UTLA-backed seats included reelected incumbent Julie Kornstein and also Mark Slavkin, who replaced incumbent Alan Gershman (Clayton, 2008).

Communities for Los Angeles Student Success (CLASS). In June 2013, a coalition of community and education organizations formed what they called CLASS—Communities for Los Angeles Student Success. The organizations include Families in Schools, Educators 4 Excellence, Community Coalition, Center for Powerful Public Schools, Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), InnerCity Struggle, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), Los Angeles Urban League, Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), Promesa Boyle Heights, and others. Although they remained their own separate entities, this coalition, which represented 115,000 parents, students, teachers, and other community members, vowed to work together to close the achievement gap at LAUSD by: (a)

lifting up low-performing schools; (b) expanding access to quality teaching and learning; and (c) increasing resources, support, and safety for students (Sacks, 2013).

Mayoral control. In 2005, following the endorsement of UTLA, former Speaker of the California State Assembly and Los Angeles City Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa succeeded in the election as mayor of Los Angeles. Just before being sworn in, however, he stunned the union by endorsing a legislative proposal by state senator Gloria Romero, to grant the new mayor the power to appoint the LAUSD school board. This would have been a significant shift in the make-up of the historically elected school board. During his first State of the City address, Villaraigosa shocked audiences when he also announced his intention to assume full control of LAUSD, much like the mayors in New York and Chicago did, in order to provide accountable leadership for the failing district.

Villaraigosa's plan was received with intense opposition from then–LAUSD superintendent Roy Romer, who rejected the claim that the district was failing. Following the departure of Romer shortly thereafter, Villaraigosa pressed on. California State Assembly Bill 1381, which gave the mayor considerable control of the district while maintaining the elected school board, was overwhelmingly passed by the legislature and signed into law by Governor Schwarzenegger in September 2006. The LAUSD school board then filed a suit to block the law and, in December 2006, the Second District Court of Appeal, ruled AB 1381 unconstitutional (Boyd et al., 2008; Kerchner et al., 2008; "Mayoral takeovers," 2006).

Reforms

Given the plethora of challenges discussed so far, LAUSD is often thought to be unreformable, though many have tried. According to Hess (1999), not only are districts often

pursuing an immense number of reforms, but they also recycle initiatives, constantly modifying previous initiatives, and adopting innovative reform A to replace practice B, even as another district is adopting B as an innovative reform to replace practice A. The collective exercise of reform has become what Hess (1999) called "a spinning of wheels."

Attempts at solving some of LAUSD's greatest challenges through reform have taken shape through innumerable administrative reorganizations and at least four large, systematic reform plans (Boyd et al., 2008). The politics of school reform is not a new phenomenon; however, the necessity for leadership to balance political and professional demands incentivizes the overuse of reform as a tactic to ease political tension and address political demands. Policymakers' emphasis on the politically attractive aspects of reform has produced a climate of carelessness about planning the details of implementing reforms. As a consequence, "policies and reforms often fall apart when they encounter the realities of daily life in the classrooms" (Hess, 1999, pp. 11–12).

According to Hess (1999), getting urban schools unstuck from the cycle of perpetual reform initiatives requires a shift in emphasis away from the pursuit of the "silver bullet" and toward an understanding of why urban school systems engage in reform and why nearly every reform fails to produce the desired outcomes (Hess, 1999). In *Learning From LA: The Sweep of Change in American Public Education* (Kerchner et al., 2008) and *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities are Reshaping Public Education* (Boyd et al., 2008), the authors analyzed the major reform initiatives that began to emerge in the Los Angeles Unified School District during the 1990s.

The big four. Boyd et al. (2008) arrived at the conclusion that the four major reform initiatives that were attempted in LAUSD during the 1960s through the 1990s were not failures. In fact, the authors suggested that these reforms were part of a much larger change in the entire institution of public education (Boyd et al., 2008). According to Boyd, the reformers of the 1990s auditioned and refined four institutional ideas about how the district should be restructured and operate differently. Although these initiatives have not been institutionalized long enough to consider them successful, the persistent and evolving ideas they worked with continue to play a central role in the district's ongoing institutional transformation. These ideas are understood to educators and policymakers as universal high standards, decentralization, greater parental and grassroots engagement, and school choice (Boyd et al., 2008).

1967: Report of the planning team. In response to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), LAUSD created an 11-member planning team of administrators and teachers who broke up into three subcommittees to research the recently passed legislation and to work on developing recommendations to the Board of Education on reforms that should be implemented (Boyd et al., 2008; Kerchner et al., 2008). The demographics subcommittee collected data and studied the rapid demographic changes in Los Angeles. The Specially Funded Programs subcommittee focused on "the crippling handicaps faced by environmentally and economically disadvantaged young people in acquiring an education that will prepare them for full participation in society" (Boyd et al., 2008; Kerchner et al., 2008). The Integration Subcommittee was responsible for finding a politically acceptable recommendation for integrating what was then the most segregated urban school district in America (Boyd et al., 2008; Kerchner et al., 2008). Recommendations from the

subcommittees included adapting the curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of all students, creating greater alignment and coordination of programs, and other local and national systematic ways to deal with the problems of integration. Twenty years after the commissioning of the two reports, the next three major reforms came in relatively rapid succession each other.

1989: The Children Can No Longer Wait. In the late 1980s, at the request of LAUSD superintendent Harry Handler, associate superintendent Paul Possemato led several committees that created two reform plans. The first, *Priorities for Education*, was written in 1986 after the release of *A Nation at Risk.* The writers of the *Priorities for Education* plan sought to deal with micromanagement by the school board and the overly rigid central bureaucracy by recommending more autonomy that would allow principals to run their schools. Possemato, however, failed to sell the plan before the school board brought in Leonard Britton, the new superintendent from Miami. Superintendent Britton asked Possemato to lead another effort to develop a different reform report, *The Children Can No Longer Wait*, which was a 179-page document that contained 38 recommendations requiring $431 million over 10 years to implement. The recommendations focused on massive internal reforms that included the decentralization of schools, setting high standards for all students, integrating professional development, and establishing an intelligent assessment system (Boyd et al., 2008; Kerchner et al., 2008). Of the total implementation amount, $312 million would have been spent on universal access to preschool, class size reduction in the elementary grade levels, increased hours for teachers to spend in professional development, and increases in budgets to support additional staff, field trips, books, and supplies. Although the report was adopted unanimously by the school board, it was never implemented in a systematic way. The district cited "horrendous

budget cuts," a teacher strike, and a recession as the reasons for failing to implement the recommendations comprehensively (Boyd et al., 2008; Kerchner et al., 2008).

1993: Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN). In the early 1990s, when asked to comment about the state of education in Los Angeles, Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan and UTLA president Helen Bernstein had this to say,

> The bottom line is saving a whole generation of our youth. The litany of social ills—illiteracy, crime, drug use, gang affiliation, homelessness—all have at their root a society that has failed in education. The breakneck speed at which technology is advancing has put demands on education that it currently cannot meet. (Kerchner et al., 2008, p. 50)

At that time, William Anton, who had also served on the 1967 Planning Team, became the district's first Hispanic superintendent. Early in his tenure, an emerging civic coalition known as Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now (LEARN) pressured Anton to accept a reform plan that would bring about unspecified institutional changes to LAUSD. LEARN was said to have begun at a breakfast meeting between businessman Richard Riordan, who later became mayor, and UTLA president Helen Bernstein (Kerchner et al., 2008).

Riordan and Bernstein were seemingly an unlikely pair. Riordan was a rich venture capitalist who symbolized entrepreneurial capital and was president of a union that despised capitalists, while Bernstein earned a teacher's salary of roughly $47,000 per year. Union distrust in LEARN was strong, because participating meant dealing with business people that the union membership considered to be the enemy. Yet, Bernstein and Riordan united behind school reform and became friends (Kerchner et al., 2008). It was through Riordan, however, that a broad coalition of leaders came together to reform the largest school district in California. Virgil

Roberts, one of the plaintiff's attorneys in the Crawford desegregation lawsuit; Lockheed chairman Roy Anderson; ARCO president Robert Wycoff; politicians and political organizers such as Mike Roos, Gary Hart, Bill Honig, and Steve Barr; college presidents Theordore Mitchell and Steven Sample; and community advocates such as Peggy Funkhouser and Rosalindo Lugo all joined the LEARN coalition. Later, the LEARN Working Group created a task force committee made up of more than 600 Angelenos who volunteered to research one aspect of education in Los Angeles and represent the community, while working to create a consensus policy. A large number of these taskforce members were UTLA members who recognized the need to restructure the district (Kerchner et al., 2008). The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which represented clerical and other service workers, and the Association of Administrators of Los Angeles (AALA), which represented principals and other administrators, also were represented on the taskforce (Kerchner et al., 2008).

The Los Angeles Board of Education voted in 1993 to unanimously support the LEARN plan, named *For All Our Children*, which called for school sites to have control over their budgets and governance. In order for schools to be accepted as a LEARN site, however, an endorsement from three quarters of all teachers was required, along with evidence of parent involvement, and the addition of social services on the campus. If a site was selected, the principal and a lead teacher would attend intense training provided by UCLA's Advanced Management Program. By the fall of 1996, just 3 years after its unanimous adoption by the school board, four cohorts totaling about 40% of the district's schools had entered the program (Boyd, 2008). However, not everyone applauded the move. Upper-level administrators saw

LEARN as an improper coalition of the teacher's union and the business elite against professional educators and elected school board (Kerchner et al., 2008).

By the summer of 1998, after the program spread to nearly half the district, the initiative experienced a great loss of support. It was clear that LEARN had run its course. A series of events resulted in the weakening of support for the initiative: the retirement of Superintendent Sid Thompson in 1997; rumblings of a mayoral takeover; the death of Helen Bernstein, who had recently stepped down from her role as UTLA president; then, Mary Chambers, who operated LEARN, resigned to take another position; and finally, LEARN's liaisons to the business community, Robert Wycoff, Roy Anderson, and Peggy Funkhouser, all retired, taking with them critical civic support for the program. The turnover of leadership left Assistant Superintendent Judy Burton and the LEARN schools isolated from the rest of the district structure, which, when coupled with severe budget cuts and competing programs, caused new superintendent Ruben Zacarias to halt LEARN in 1999 (Kerchner et al., 2008).

Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP). Around the same time as the Board's approval of the LEARN program, the district was reacting to another project that focused on reforms with the Los Angeles schools. In December 1993, in an effort to raise the level of awareness around the importance of precollegiate education, American publisher, philanthropist, and diplomat Walter Annenberg announced a gift of $500 million to public education. This gift later generated an additional $600 million more in matching grants. With reforms already in place in LAUSD, there was reluctance from Annenberg to bring the *Annenberg Challenge* to Los Angeles. However, as a result of collaboration between respected academics Vartan Gregorian and Steven Sample, the Annenberg Challenge came to LAUSD

with Virgil Roberts—a civil rights attorney who worked closely with the Los Angeles

Educational Partnership and LEARN—selected to lead the development of the proposal. One of

Roberts's first charges was to develop a board for LAAMP that reflected the racial and ethnic

diversity of Los Angeles, an approach that differed from the LEARN effort (Kerchner et al.,

2008).

The initial LAAMP plan in LAUSD included the idea that the initiative would continue

the work of LEARN by going "broader and deeper." Much like LEARN, the proposal called for

cluster leaders that would operate decentralized, autonomous families of schools. However, three

critical decisions made by the Annenberg Foundation, LAAMP leaders, and affiliated local

universities, resulted in the creation of an organization that was different from what the

education community in Los Angeles had seen before (Kerchner et al., 2008). The first

difference with LAAMP was its decision to form its own organization instead of merging with or

extending from an existing group like LEARN. The second was the decision by LAAMP's

leaders to be a metropolitan project, which meant taking on the monumental task of being the

liaison between the Annenberg Foundation and 15 school districts throughout Los Angeles

County, not just the LAUSD The final decision was a radical one—LAAMP leaders decided to

exclude representatives from teacher unions and school district administrators from its board of

directors. "For the first time, the school district faced a reform agenda almost entirely crafted by

outside agents" (Kerchner et al., 2008, p. 130).

Maria Casillas, an educator who had been a LAUSD teacher, principal, and assistant

superintendent before spending 2 years as an administrator in El Paso and then returning to Los

Angeles, was chosen to lead LAAMP. Under the leadership of Casillas, LAAMP negotiated a

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the LAUSD, from which emerged the LAAMP

Network of Schools and an agreement for the district to provide financial support and other

critical resources to the effort. The LAAMP School Families represented a power shift from the

centralized manner in which schools were operated in the district, to a collaborative,

decentralized model. This model also allowed for the analysis of longitudinal student data that

was not possible before, which shed light on the connection between achievement in middle

schools and high schools to their roots in the lower grades. Leaders of LAAMP believed if it

could get teachers, parents, and administrators from different levels in the system to meet and

talk together, they could collaborate and find solutions to the challenges plaguing student

achievement (Kerchner et al., 2008). At the end of the effort, LAAMP funded 28 networks or

School Families, 14 inside LAUSD and 14 in other districts in the county. Unfortunately, support

within LAUSD was not strong—most cluster leaders and Superintendent Roy Romer actively

discouraged the structure.

According to the authors of *Learning from L.A.*, the success of the Annenberg Challenge

is arguable. If the goal was large-scale change in public school systems within a few years, then

clearly the Challenge failed. However, if the intent was to maintain the spotlight on education

reform and keep the politics of change moving forward, then the Annenberg Challenge could be

credited with playing a major role. One of the most significant accomplishments of the

Challenge was its persistence on increasing parent involvement to support children's learning at

home (Kerchner et al., 2008). At the end of LAAMP, two organizations formed that continued

work around parent involvement: Families in Schools, led by Maria Casillas, and the Boyle

Heights Learning Collaborative (BHLC) in East Los Angeles.

Over the span of just over 30 years, the reforms that were attempted at LAUSD focused on increasing academic achievement for the district's students, particularly students who came from disenfranchised environments and who were, more often than not, students of color. It was also clear that themes of decentralization, parental and community engagement, and school choice were common threads throughout. It is important to note, however, that with the last two reforms in particular, the district leadership (i.e., the school board and the superintendent) did not lead the effort nor were they invested enough to be held accountable for their failures In these instances, community stakeholders drove the efforts and applied pressure on the district to make the proposed changes.

As well intentioned as the leaders of these two initiatives may have been, without the full support of the school board and consistent engagement with the existing superintendent, successfully implementing systematic reforms like these would be incredibly difficult. Lack of critical support, coupled with the common issue of leadership turnover at the superintendent and board level, presents issues of accountability, consistency of vision, and commitment to long-term reform.

Leadership Turnover

Role of the superintendent. Urban school systems are managed by superintendents who—particularly in big-city districts—determine the shape of the school board's agenda and the amount of information that board members receive. Power has been centralized in the superintendent's hands because the superintendent is a full-time, professional expert who has a staff and is able to speak for the entire administration. As professionals supervised often by amateur boards that are often green in experience and lack the expertise needed to generate

meaningful strategies, superintendents have a virtual monopoly on educational expertise and other critical district information. The pressures superintendents experience often mirror the politicized role of a city manager; superintendents are political figures, as "politics and public education are inextricably intertwined, and pretending that matters are otherwise does not help" (Hess, 1999, p. 181). They remain "under tremendous pressure to produce short-term results, with many feeling they must undertake everything all at once in every school in order to prove their worth" (Hess, 1999, p. 12). For superintendents, oftentimes doing too much is far safer than doing too little "Inaction is the worst possible sin for a public official facing a crisis" (Hess, 1999, p. 12).

In *Leading to Change*, Johnson (1996) studied superintendents in 12 school districts. She found that conventional expectations of heroic leadership were unrealistic and significantly exceeded the real power of contemporary superintendents. Johnson suggested that the notion of heroic leadership misconstrued the real nature of the superintendency and increased the burden that superintendents must shoulder. Superintendents were constricted by limited positional power and organizational complexity, but those who learned to work effectively within their role would be the pivotal players in improving the performance of a school system (Hess, 1999).

Superintendent tenure. According to Hess (1999), the typical tenure for an urban superintendent is 3 years or less. He made the claim that each subsequent superintendent is hired to implement a reform agenda; however, given the short expected tenure of superintendents, they rarely are successful at making a significant difference. This means few are in place long enough to oversee the full life-cycle of a reform, resulting in an endless stream of new initiatives or "policy churn," with the schools and teachers never having time to become comfortable with any

given change. As educational scholar Theodore Kowalski has argued, "The idea that one individual can successfully transform a complex organization by imposing his or her vision in a relatively short period of time is simply myopic" (Hess, 1999, p. 14).

Kerchner et al. (2008) asserted that although urban school observers like to imagine that each new superintendent brings the promise of an immediate turnaround, this is unrealistic. Transforming schools requires that administrators have "enough time to create change, make the necessary reforms, and measure the reforms Such a process requires approximately 2 to 5 years" (Kerchner et al., 2008, p. 39). However, Hess (1999) suggested that the transformation process takes longer than 2 to 5 years. He maintained that the time necessary to fully implement changes in teaching practice is more like 5 to 10 years—nearly doubling the amount of time Kerchner et al. suggested. Hess claimed that, in short, most urban school systems are too big, program effects occur too far downstream, and system outcomes are too ambiguous for superintendents to have a significant impact in just 3 or 4 years.

In a study conducted by Hess (1999), he found that the mean tenure for urban superintendents was 3.8 years. In fact, 40% of the superintendents in the sample districts had been in office for 2 years or less, and only one in five had been in place more than 5 years (Hess, 1999, p. 49). Seventy percent of the 53 districts in the study had had at least two superintendents between 1991–1995, and 30% had had three or more superintendents in that 5-year span (Hess, 1999).

Superintendent turnover at LAUSD. Superintendent turnover at LAUSD has shown similar patterns as those in the study conducted by Hess (1999). Since the establishment of the Los Angeles City School District in 1853, Los Angeles has had 50 superintendents (including

interim assignments) leading its schools. The longest tenure among the 49, was 11 years, by superintendents James A. Foshay (1895–1906) and Vierling Kersey (1937–1948). Over the previous 25 years, LAUSD has been led by nine different superintendents; only two of those remaining in their positions for more than 3 years—Sidney A. Thompson (5 years) and Roy Romer (6 years) (J. Crain, personal communication, November 4, 2015). Reasons for the resignations varied between external pressures, internal politics, difference in vision between the superintendent and the school board, and health issues.

LAUSD superintendent William Anton's 1992 resignation was prompted by the school board's micromanagement; Sidney Thompson (1992–1997) resigned following talk of a mayoral takeover; Ruben Zacarias (1997–2000) decided to leave his position as superintendent two months into the 1999 school board election, when the "reform" candidates took office. This prompted the interim appointment (5 months) of Ramon Cortines, former chancellor of the New York City school system. During Cortines's short-term interim assignment, he managed to divide the district into 11 semi-autonomous subunits. Former Colorado governor, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and noneducator, Roy Romer was appointed superintendent from 2000–2006, following Ramon Cortines's first interim superintendent appointment. During his tenure, he reverted the district back to centralized control, reduced the 11 subdistricts established by Cortines to eight, and launched a massive school-building program, which was described as the largest civil works project in U.S. history. Following an attempted mayoral takeover by then–Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Romer resigned and was replaced by former Navy admiral (and noneducator), David Brewer During his tenure, Brewer commissioned

a report that detailed what was wrong with the district; following its release, he pledged to clean up the dysfunction (Kerchner et al., 2008).

Over the 7 years that followed the stream of superintendents named above, LAUSD would twice more be led by Ramon Cortines and would experience the leadership of Superintendent John Deasy, who was known to the education world as being very reform-minded. In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times* titled, "The bad-old days at LAUSD," the *LA Times* editorial board described the relationships Superintendent John Deasy had with the school board as being at "an all-time low" and with the teachers union as "anything but satisfactory"—opinions that the *LA Times* editorial board thought signaled a call for Deasy to resign, which would give the district the opportunity to go "back to the good-old days." The article goes on to describe Deasy's tenure in the district as marked with reforms of the teacher evaluation system, an associated court case shedding light on the lack of college-prep courses available to Black and Latino students, a controversial iPad project, and growth of charter schools. Despite the challenges with his reform initiatives and strained relationship with UTLA, John Deasy's tenure included increases in test scores, increases in the number of students of color taking college-prep courses, and a decrease in the number of dropouts. The writers then asked the poignant question about the union wielding its influence for reforms that benefit students more than their members: "How well off were [students] when almost nothing happened in the district without the approval of UTLA?" (*LA Times* editorial board, 2014).

In early January 2016, LAUSD's very own Michelle King was appointed superintendent of the district. Dr. King was a product of LAUSD schools and had spent 30 years working at the district as teacher, coordinator, assistant principal, principal, chief administrator of secondary

instruction, local district superintendent, chief of staff to the superintendent, senior deputy superintendent, and chief deputy superintendent. When asked what was different about Dr. King's appointment, then–LAUSD board member Steve Zimmer articulated what many in and around LAUSD thought: She was the "only candidate who could speak from every level of experience in this district" (Smith, 2016, para. 15). Just 2 years after her appointment, after initially being on medical leave, the district announced that Dr. King would retire at the end of the 2017–2018 school year.

Impact of leadership turnover on systems. Of the many impacts that leadership turnover has on school systems, perhaps most common—particularly in urban districts trying to implement reforms—is the constant churn of initiatives that do not take root. According to Hess (1999), districts where superintendent turnover was high had difficulty sustaining commitment to specific reforms because of an emphasis on initiating reforms instead of fostering ongoing reforms, thus causing a decrease in administrative support and in resources available to conduct needs analyses to diagnose problems. Hess also claimed that superintendent tenure trends actually discouraged a focus on long-term improvement and encouraged an emphasis on short-term crises and the projection of a reassuring image of progress. This shortsightedness is exacerbated when urban school boards hire new superintendents from outside the system who enter districts with a mission to "shake up the system," thus relieving any obligation to build upon previous initiatives or strategies that could prove successful.

In his study on the impact of turnover on school reform, Hess (1999) examined the number of reform initiatives started in districts with rapid superintendent turnover and compared them to those with stable leadership. Districts that hired three or more superintendents in the

1991–1995 period of his study proposed 13% more reform than districts that had only one superintendent throughout the same period; however, districts with superintendents in office for 2 years or less were much more active than districts with veteran superintendents. As a result of the high rate of turnover, only a handful of long-term superintendents were available for Hess's study. Hess theorized that the longevity of superintendents' tenure had a strong positive impact on the implementation of reforms. In his study, stable leadership improved the success of reforms that had been enacted within the past 3 years. He posited the reason as a long-term superintendent's ability to devote attention to planning and implementing local initiatives.

The previous sections of this literature review have made it very clear that the work of top-level leaders to improve educational outcomes in urban Los Angeles is incredibly complex and multifaceted. Not only are top-level leaders required to manage the social and political environments of their school districts in order to advance the work, but they also need to consider school board agendas, internal and external pressures, and the constant shift in local and national priorities. When we then consider the various challenges mentioned with what the literature tells us about leadership turnover, there is no doubt that identifying leaders to step into top-level roles in the Los Angeles Unified School District is of paramount importance.

In the next section, the literature review describes three leadership frameworks that were used to develop a new theoretical frame applied to this study. Given the demographics, academic achievement history, size, and level of influence at LAUSD, three frameworks in particular were examined: leadership for multicultural education, followed by transformative leadership framework, and finally leadership for social justice.

Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework

Upon review of the literature on leadership frameworks, and education leadership frameworks specifically, I found very little that explicitly spoke to the unique issues in urban education settings. What I did find, however, were frameworks that focused on particular facets of urban education leadership approaches. For the purpose of this study, I combined aspects of the following frameworks to create a new framework specific to urban education system leaders: leadership for multicultural education, transformative leadership, and leadership for social justice.

Given the continuous challenges within an urban school district like the Los Angeles Unified School District, the demographic profile of its students, and the sociopolitical environment within which it operates, top-level leaders like superintendents and board members ought to possess certain personal characteristics and view their purpose through a lens that serves every student. For the present study, I developed and employed a conceptual framework of *transformative urban education leadership* using the literature on transformative leadership and social justice frameworks through the lens of Nieto's (1999) leadership for multicultural education.
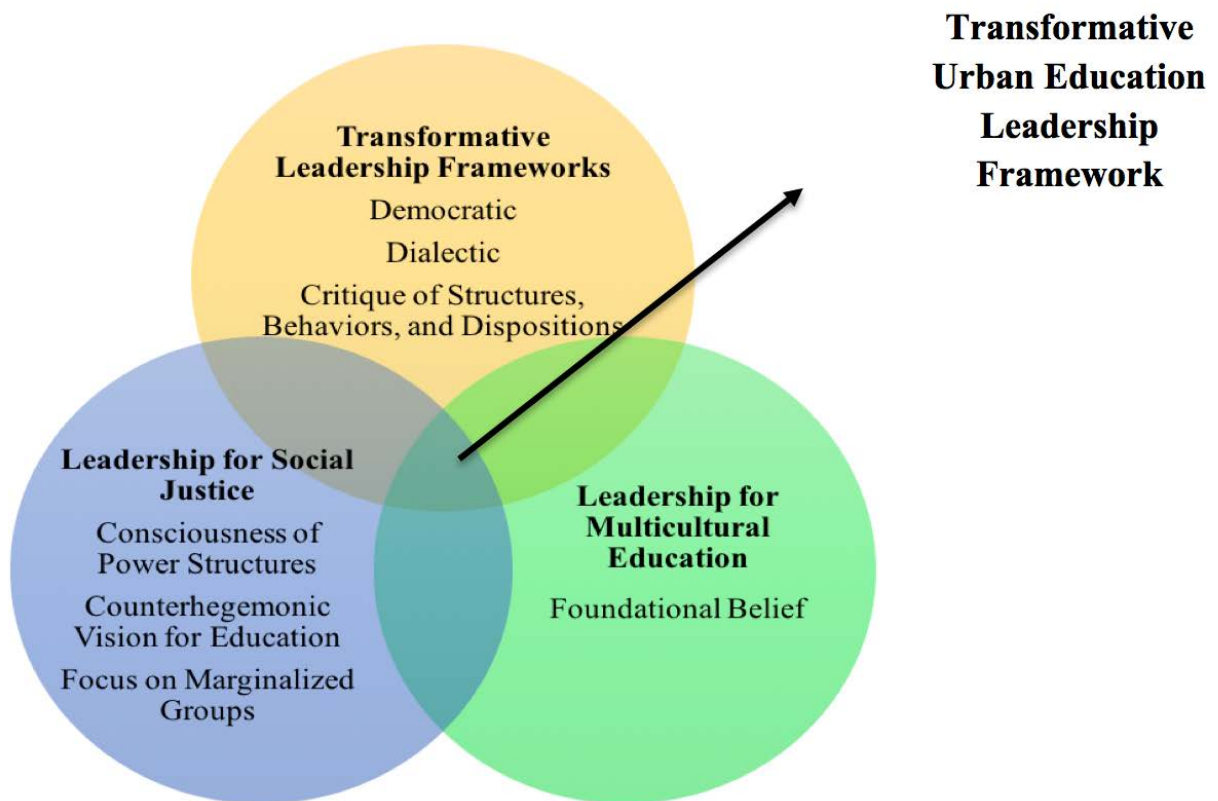
Figure 7. A new conceptual framework: Transformative urban education leadership.

In this framework, transformative urban education leaders work to (a) foster democratic and dialectic environments; (b) maintain a moral obligation to challenge the status quo by actively critiquing internal and external structures, behaviors, and dispositions; (c) acknowledge and have a deep understanding of the power dynamics at play; (d) embrace the moral obligation to articulate a vision that is counter to the status quo; and (e) while maintaining a vision for all students to succeed, focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups. This leader leverages these characteristics in order to create asset-based, antiracist, and antibiased education communities that maintain high expectations and rigorous standards for all students—especially those from underserved and marginalized communities.

In the following sections, I review the literature used to develop this framework using Nieto's (1999) *Leadership for Multicultural Education* as the foundation, followed by an explanation of the evolution of transformative leadership theory, and leadership for social justice frameworks.

Leadership for Multicultural Education

Multicultural education, for many, is defined as little more than curriculum design, specific skillsets or techniques accomplished through sensitivity training or prejudice reduction, or takes the form of the occasional separate units in lessons about cultural artifacts or ethnic holidays. In her book *The Light in Their Eyes*, Nieto (1999) suggested that multicultural education, when conceptualized as a broad-based school reform approach, can impact the manner in which and to what extent students learn. When the focus shifts to conditions that can contribute to student underachievement, multicultural education allows educators to explore alternatives to systematic problems that lead to academic failure for many students (Banks & McGee Banks, 2003).

Nieto & Bode (2008) maintained that, to approach school reform from a multicultural perspective, we need to first have an understanding of multicultural education within its sociopolitical context (as cited in Banks & McGee Banks, 2003). A sociopolitical context calls attention to the fact that education is an essential element of greater societal and political forces; therefore, decisions concerning educational practices are influenced by the broader social policies (Banks & McGee Banks, 2003). In his writings, Freire (1985) also confirmed that every educational decision—whether it is made at the classroom, city, state, or national level—is imbedded within a particular ideological framework that makes assumptions about the nature of

learning, about who is capable of achieving, about what is valued, and who should be at the center of the educational process (as cited in Banks & McGee Banks, 2003). More specifically, Banks and McGee used Nieto's (2000) definition of multicultural education with a sociopolitical context, as follows:

A process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect.

Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 305)

Nieto (1999) advocated that, when applying the definition of multicultural education in the sociopolitical context to school reforms, one must take into account both micro- and macro-level issues that affect student learning. She described micro-level issues to include cultures, languages, and experiences of students and their families, and implored leaders to consider how these are taken into account in developing school policies and practices. Macro-level issues, according to Nieto, include (a) the racial, social class, and gender stratification that maintains inequality; and (b) the resources and access to learning provided or denied by schools. They also include the way that students and their families view their status in schools and society. Nieto

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goes on to describe five kinds of school reform anchored in multicultural education that can substantially improve student learning:

- School reform that is anti-racist and ant-biased.

- School reform that reflects an asset-based model, recognizing that all students have talents and strengths that enhance their education.

- School reform based on the intimate interconnectedness between educators and students.

- School reform based on high expectations and rigorous standards for all learners.

- School reform that is empowering and just (Nieto, 1999).

Nieto's (1999) leadership for multicultural education is applicable to the K–12 education setting in Los Angeles because it recognizes the social, political, and economic forces that influence the mindsets of top-level leaders. This framework also addresses issues specific to urban settings: racism, classism, gender inequities, access to services, and power dynamics. Top-level leaders in Los Angeles who are working to ensure all students are offered high-quality educational opportunities should approach system reform with the beliefs described in Nieto's five-point model, above. My theoretical framework for transformative urban education leadership, therefore, has as its foundation first (a) that all students can achieve at high levels, (b) that their talents and strengths are viewed and leveraged as assets, (c) that the environments in which they learn and relationships formed between students and adults are free of racism and biases, and (d) that the goal of education is to empower students in a just way.

Transformative Leadership

  The characteristics. Because the literature on transformative leadership is still relatively new, and there seems to be significant overlap between transformational and transformative leadership, I use *transformative* as the term to apply to this study. Given these commonalities and Shields's (2010) noted distinction that transformative leaders engage the broader external forces in order to achieve meaningful change, I argue that top-level education leaders should strive toward transformative leadership as their approach to achieving equity on behalf of the students and families in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

  Table 1 shows a nonexhaustive list of characteristics discussed by Freire (1970, 1998), Burns (1978), Foster (1986), Weiner (2003), and Shields (2008, 2010) as employed by both transformational and transformative leaders. Since transformative leadership is an outgrowth of transformational leadership, it is appropriate to include both in the chart below, to illustrate the overlap of some key characteristics that transformational and transformative leaders utilize when leading.

Table 1

Characteristics of Transformative Leadership

Theorist	Collaborative	Democratic	Foster trust and respect	Appeal to value systems	Dialectic	Working toward a common purpose	Humility	Hope	Critique of Structures
Burns	X			X		X			
Foster		X			X				X
Shields	X	X		X	X	X		X	X
Freire	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Weiner		X			X				X

Source. Freire (1970, 1998), Burns (1978), Foster (1986), Weiner (2003), and Shields (2008 and 2010)

Creating a democratic environment, engaging in a dialectic relationship, and critiquing the current systems (both internal and external) are most common among the five theorists listed in Table 1, followed closely by creating collaborative relationships and working toward a common purpose. I am not surprised that collaboration and working toward a common purpose were also very prominent in the literature, because both are essential for an authentic democratic and dialectic environment. Banks (2002) stated that in order to respond to the demographic imperative of developing effective and productive citizens, our schools need transformative

leaders who have a vision of the future as well as the skills and abilities to communicate that vision to others.

Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire (1970) was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy. He is best known for his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is not only considered one of the foundational writings of the critical pedagogy movement, but also examines and criticizes the deep relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. In this manuscript, Freire used the terms *transform, transformation,* and *transformative* to describe the changes that may occur as a result of certain conditions being met in education. Of particular importance, for this review, among Freire's writings on education is his idea of "dialogue" as a means for transformation through education and collective social action. Dialoguing, however, is not simply an exchange of words between one individual and another, or between the leader and the collective. Dialogue, Freire claimed, "cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people . . . Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (p. 89). In order to dialogue with a person, the leader must operate from a place of love and value for the humanity of the individual.

In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (1998) reiterated the importance of leaders' faith in the people. Freire stated that leaders who strive to create change in a system must do so with a sense of humility, including willingness to learn from the people and have faith in them (Freire 1970). The absence of this faith promotes leadership that is rooted in ideas of subjugation and deficit that perpetuates the domination and oppression of the people. Freire's (1970) assertion that "the people must find themselves in the emerging leaders, and the latter must find themselves in the people" (p. 163) indicates his belief that dialogue is unavoidably dependent on and directed

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toward leaders' solidarity with the people. He wrote, "Solidarity is born only when the leaders witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people" (Freire, 1970, p. 129) It is in the development of this relationship, rooted in love and faith, that true leadership is manifested.

Drawing on Freire's work, Weiner (2003) said "transformative leadership is an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy, and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility" (p. 89). Weiner assigned the transformative leader the responsibility to instigate structural transformations, reorganizing the political space and understanding the relationship between leaders and followers dialectically. Transformative leaders, he said, have to do this transformative work in education with "one foot in the dominant structures of power and authority" (Weiner, 2003, p. 91) and the other foot in the transformation. Doing so, however, without yielding to the philosophy of the dominant culture is of paramount importance for the leader and for challenging the status quo.

Burns (1978), often referred to as a leading authority on leadership, believed that leadership is based on relationships, motives, and values. He distinguished between two different types of leadership: transactional leadership, in which leaders focus on the relationship between the leader and follower, and transformational leadership, in which leaders focus on the beliefs, needs, and values of their followers. Burns defined transactional leadership as one in which each side gives something of value to the other as an exchange.

> Such leadership occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others
> for the purpose of an exchange of valued things. The exchange could be economic or
> political or psychological in nature. . . . Each party to the bargain recognizes the other as

a person. Their purposes are related, at least to the extent that the purposes stand within

the bargaining process and can be advanced by maintaining that process. But beyond this,

the relationship does not go. . . . A leadership act took place, but it was not one that binds

leader and follower together in a mutual and continuing pursuit of a higher purpose. (pp.

19–20)

This type of leadership, however, is not what one should aim to employ, because the so-called

leadership ends when the transaction is complete. There is no real change, although there is,

technically, a change in that an exchange took place, there is no real change in the individuals

themselves, which is critical to the manifestation of transformative leadership.

Engaging the individual in a personal way, in a mutual process of "raising one another to

higher levels of morality and motivation" is, according to Burns (1978, p. 389), transformational

leadership—a form that is more effective than transactional leadership. By raising the bar and

appealing to one's ideals and values, the transformational leader is able to attract followers in a

way that encourages collaboration and discourages the individualistic appeal of a transactional

exchange. Burns addressed this difference between transactional and transformational leadership

by stating that,

Such leadership occurs when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that

leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their

purposes, which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of

transactional leadership, become fused. Power bases are linked not as counterweights but

as mutual support for common purpose. (p. 20)

Foster (1989), one of the first writers to talk about transformative educational leadership—different than transformational leadership in a business context—contended that leadership should be separated from the leader because, he explained, leadership "does not reside in an individual, but in the relationship between individuals" (Foster, 1989, p. 46). He challenged the concept that leadership only resided in one individual at the top and, instead, stressed the quality of the interpersonal relationships within and between individuals. The leader's role, therefore, is to engage in transformative practices that change those social relationships and empower others to engage in democratic practices. This understanding pushes leadership further away from management (Van Oord, 2013) and toward a more distributive model.

Shields (2010), building upon Foster's (1989) definition of transformative educational leadership, posited that transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy and seeks to challenge inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice. By critiquing these inequitable practices, transformative educational leaders offer hope and promise, not only of greater individual achievement, but also of a better life lived in common with others.

During the late 1990s, there started to surface in the literature a distinction between the use of the term *transformative* and *transformational* leadership—even though the two were still used interchangeably. Shields (2010) noted that although the terms *transforming leadership*, *transformation*, and *transformational* have been used in Burns's (1978) seminal work, *Leadership*, in this work, Burns identified two types of leaders: transformative and transactional. Transformative leaders have a vision that they use to mobilize people to action Burns's conception of these leadership styles, however, according to Shields, points directly to the way

transformative leadership was beginning to be defined. According to Shields, both transformational and transformative leadership share common roots in the moral purpose and the notion of transforming or changing something. It "is little wonder that the two terms have frequently been used synonymously and, without clarifying the distinctions, to describe educational leadership" (Shields, 2010, p. 565). In her clarification between the two, Shields stated that transformational leadership theories focused primarily on what happened within an organization, whereas transformative leadership theories focused on the broader social and political sphere that recognized the inequities and struggles that exist in both, which directly impact the performance of the organization.

Leadership for Social Justice

Marshall and Oliva's (2010) book, *Leadership for Social Justice,* sets out to conceptualize a social justice framework for educational leadership in order to prepare leaders who are activists, with a sense of responsibility to intervene to make schools equitable places of learning. The authors expressed that discussions about social justice in the field of education generally, and in educational leadership more specifically, have typically framed the concept of social justice around issues of race, diversity, marginalization, gender, and spirituality Dantley and Tillman added age, ability, and sexual orientation to the list of issues (as cited in Marshall & Oliva, 2010).

According to Marshall and Oliva (2010), leadership for social justice investigates and presents solutions for issues that generate and reproduce social inequities. Tillman (as cited in Marshall & Oliva, 2010) suggested that social justice theorists and activists focus their inquiry

on how entrenched theories, norms, and practices in schools and society lead to social, political, economic, and educational inequities.

Research conducted by Marshall and Oliva (2010) included frameworks for the application of social justice to educational leadership. Foster (as cited in in Marshall & Oliva, 2010), in his work *Paradigms and Promises: New Approaches to Educational Administration*, did not specifically use the term *social justice*; however, the underlying theme of his work focuses on the application of moral, transformative, and socially just leadership concepts and practices. Framed by critical theory, Foster goes on to state that "leadership must be critically educative; it cannot only look at the conditions in which we live, but it also must decide how to change them" (as cited in in Marshall & Oliva, 2010,p. 20). Starratt's (1994) multidimensional ethical framework focuses on the concepts of the ethics of care, justice, and critique—similar to Foster's conceptualization. Starrat proposed that school leaders use these ethics to form a "human, ethical response to unethical and challenging environments," in which school leaders operate (as cited in in Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p. 20). Sharing an example of how leaders could use the ethic of justice, Starrat stated that leaders pay serious attention to the way that students, particularly those from marginalized groups, are socialized in the school setting Kumashiro's framework also focuses on the impact society has on schooling, paying close attention to the oppression of the "other." Kumashiro defined *other* as follows:

> those groups that are traditionally marginalized in society, i.e., that are *other than* the norm, such as students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male, but not stereotypically "masculine," and students who are, or are perceived to be, queer. (p. 21)

Following their extensive research on leadership for social justice, Marshall and Oliva (2010) drew out similar themes from their review of the literature, which emphasized moral values, justice, equity, care, respect, and the investigation of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability on the education of students—more specifically, on the underserved, underrepresented, and the undereducated who encounter oppression in schools The authors go on to highlight five specific characteristics that may be applied to the definitions of social justice and educational leadership for social justice They are as follows:

1. A consciousness of the broader social, cultural, and political context of schools.

2. The critique of the marginalizing behaviors and predispositions of schools and their leadership.

3. A commitment to the more genuine enactment of democratic principles in schools.

4. A moral obligation to articulate the counterhegemonic vision or narrative of hope regarding education.

5. A determination to move from rhetoric to civil rights activism. (Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p. 23)

Table 2 illustrates the characteristics for social justice leadership as explained by the different models espoused by the leading authors found in the literature. Four characteristics are common among them: articulation of a counterhegemonic vision for education, critique of broad social conditions (e.g., race, class, gender, marginalization), consciousness of power structures and the need to challenge them, and focus on improving the lives of marginalized groups, specifically.

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Table 2

Characteristics of Leadership for Social Justice

Authors	Articulate counterhegemonic vision for education	Critique of social conditions	Ethics of care	Consciousness of power structures	Focus on marginalized groups	Commitment to democracy
Marshall & Oliva	X	X	X	X	X	X
Foster	X	X		X		
Starrat	X	X	X	X	X	
Kumashiro	X			X	X	

Source: Text but not table are from Marshall & Oliva, 2010.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to provide a rationale for choosing to focus my study on the Los Angeles educational landscape, which includes LAUSD, the second largest school district in the United States. By offering an overview of the challenges facing LAUSD, I made the case that a school district serving over 600,000 students and its external organizations—the majority of whom come from marginalized communities and who are not achieving academically to their potential—needs top-level leaders to drive the necessary reforms that will ensure high educational outcomes for all students.

The second half of the chapter focused on the specific characteristics that top-level leaders should possess when leading in urban education environments. The literature review included theories and characteristics for leaders for multicultural education, transformative leaders, and leaders for social justice. These attributes were then synthesized to create a framework for transformative urban education leadership that would be confirmed or invalidated in the process of answering my research question: Despite great challenges, what leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs contribute to the persistence of transformative leaders in K–12 urban, public education settings in Los Angeles?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Over the better part of the last 18 years, I have held many professional positions throughout the K–16 public education and policy spectrum, working to improve educational opportunities for students in urban communities. More often than not, the students and families in those communities were overwhelmingly Latino and African American. Whether I was working with school districts to build new schools or drafting statewide legislation, I regularly came upon one challenge—the great leader(s) I was working with would transition out of their positions, taking with them historical knowledge, relationships, and more importantly their strong vision for improving urban public education systems.

My interest in wanting to better understand which leadership characteristics most contribute to the persistence of transformative urban education top-level leaders is three-fold: (a) students and families who have been historically underserved deserve consistent leadership and visionaries who are committed to their learning and the improvement of their communities; (b) the field of education needs leaders with deep, contextual, and historical understandings of the landscape to provide guidance and direction, and perhaps selfishly; and (c) a strong group of transformative leaders would provide young professionals with a community to learn from and collaborate with.

The previous chapter laid the foundation for the proposed study. A review of the many challenges plaguing the Los Angeles Unified School District was provided as context into the complexity and less-than-stellar performance of the district. Stating these issues also offers insight into the social and political environments in which top-level leaders operated. These less-

than-ideal circumstances certainly do not attract floods of top talent to fill critical high-level

positions. What is important to understand, however, are the reasons why some transformative

leaders *do choose* to serve in and around LAUSD and why they stay.

This chapter outlines the details of the study, design, and the process employed for

gathering and analyzing data. The theoretical framework that was applied to the study is new to

the field of education. The *transformative urban education leadership framework*, developed for

this study, has as its foundation the belief that all students can achieve at high levels, that their

talents and strengths should be viewed and leveraged as assets, that the environments in which

they learn and relationships formed between students and adults should be free of racism and

biases, and that the goal of education is to empower students in a just way.

Purpose of the Study

The intent of the proposed study is to understand what leadership characteristics most

contribute to the success of transformative urban education top-level leaders in Los Angeles. I

also want to know what contributes to these individuals' decision to remain in urban public

education settings despite the very challenging circumstances that continue to plague the

systems.

Research Question

The intent of the study is to answer the following question: Despite great challenges,

what leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs contribute to the persistence of

transformative leaders in K–12 urban, public education settings in Los Angeles? Although the

research on effective system leadership is constantly growing, today's scholars have yet to agree

on a set of comprehensive characteristics that transformative urban education system leaders

should possess to successfully meet the needs of all students in urban public schools. Identification of these characteristics and actions may help create a recruiting and selection process for K–12 urban school leaders that screens for these characteristics. This screening could be the basis for better, more appropriate, targeted professional development and mentoring programs for K–12 urban education leaders. Ultimately, this leadership emphasis may help promote equity for students enrolled in urban education systems. The focus of data collection is to ascertain why these specific leaders chose to remain in their positions despite the challenges presented by the student population, and the internal and external environment in which they operate.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative design using multiple case studies as the means to collect data and frame the research. Since I was interested in understanding the characteristics of top-level leaders in urban education, and as a result of the complexity of this reality, case studies as my methodology was most appropriate. Yin (2014) stated that case study as a research approach is appropriate when the research question is seeking to understand a complex social phenomenon or to understand the "why" behind behaviors that are beyond the researcher's control. It is also applicable, he maintained, when the question requires an "extensive and 'in-depth' description of some social phenomenon" (Yin, 2014, p. 4). Furthermore, Yin offered three conditions the researcher should answer when determining the appropriateness of the method: the type of research question posed, the extent of control a researcher has over actual behavioral events, and the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to entirely historical events. In the case of this particular study, the research question sought to answer "why" the phenomenon

existed. The researcher did not have control over behavioral events, and the study focused on contemporary events. Therefore, according to these conditions, the case study method was fitting Using this method allowed me to explore the top-level leaders' experience holistically and more thoroughly, since the focus of the study involved not only individuals, but also had to take into consideration the complex environments they operate in. Without the qualitative portion of the study, these dynamic forces would not have been captured.

Qualitative research is recommended for new areas of research or for research where the body of knowledge that is relatively new (Patten, 2005). As the literature reflected in Chapter 2 of this study, the area of research that is the subject of this investigation is unique and new In order to have a rich understanding of the characteristics of system leaders who navigated through challenging circumstances in urban educational environments, a multiple case study design was the most appropriate approach (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). These cases were designed to have a better understanding of this phenomenon. Merriam (1998) argued that the heuristic multiple case study approach supported rethinking and reconsidering understandings of the experiences, unknown variables, and relationships.

Research Site

This study focused on the urban region of Los Angeles. As the second largest school district in the country, the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD or District) total 2017–2018 K–12 enrollment was 618,970, second only behind the New York City Department of Education. According to the 2017–2018 LAUSD Fingertip Facts (2017) released by the district in October 2017, 74% of the student population was characterized as Latino, followed by 9.8% White, 8.4% African American, and 6% Asian. As of August 2017, the Los Angeles

Unified School District employed a total of 60,240 certificated and classified employees. The district covers an area totaling 710 square miles, which includes most of the City of Los Angeles and all or portions of 26 cities and unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. The 2017–2018 school year budget for LAUSD was $7.52 billion.

The Los Angeles Unified School District does not operate in isolation. There are many organizations that are external to the district whose mission is to support and advocate on behalf of the students who attend schools in Los Angeles, their families, and communities where these stakeholders live. The research site for this study, therefore, included these organizations and their respective leaders.

Over the last 50 years, the district and Los Angeles has experienced many, many challenges. Yet, despite the constant barrage of difficulties, some system leaders are drawn to Los Angeles and *choose* to serve either in the district or for organizations whose work it is to partner with, advocate for, or support the students and families of LAUSD; others have spent most of their careers in the Los Angeles Unified School District and will continue to serve until their retirement. This particular site lent itself to a multitude of case studies from which to draw data for this study.

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Population and Sampling Method

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Purposeful sampling, a selection method that involves choosing participants according to the needs of the study, is commonly used in qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse, 1991; Patten, 2005) in that the researcher chooses participants who give a richness of information that is suitable for detailed research (Patton, 1980). The participants in this study were purposefully selected because of their unique experience in their respective positions within

the school system and for their ability to provide the researcher with a deep and thorough understanding of the topic (Patten, 2005).

Participants

Ten senior, top-level education leaders were contacted via email with a message that described the topic and purpose of the study, information about my background, and an invitation to participate. A week after sending the initial email, another invitation was extended to those who had not responded. A final email was sent to the few that did not participate in the study because they did not respond. A total of seven leaders participated. The interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. Prior to the interview, the participants were asked to sign a consent form. Pseudonyms were used in describing the participants' responses. All had 11 to 20 years' experience in educational leadership positions, held a senior-level position, and had reputations as being successful leaders, locally or nationally.

Selection Criteria

Criteria for participant selection was as follows: they were leaders directly involved or had led major K–12 initiatives or programs in Los Angeles during the least 20 years; there was consensus in the community that their work was successful and impactful; and they mostly had a positive reputation in the education sphere. The participants were current leaders or retired leaders, and were selected without regard to gender. I conducted interviews with a total of seven leaders.

Instruments and Other Sources of Data

As the primary method of data collection, interviews were conducted in what Rubin and Rubin (2012) termed *responsive interviews,* which emphasize the importance of building a

relationship of trust between the interviewer and interview to facilitate a flexible conversation (Patten, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In-depth interviewing is one of the most appropriate ways of gathering data on phenomena that are not directly observable (McCracken, 1988; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 2008). The interviews focused on what the participants' experiences were as they related to the study. (See the interview guide in the appendix.)

Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated, "In the responsive interviewing model, you are looking for material that has depth and detail and is nuanced and rich with vivid thematic material" (p. 101). The starting point was an interview guide, which can be developed using the relevant literature on the topic as well as themes created by the researcher. Hopf (1978) warned against the strict use of the interview guide, stating that doing so may "restrict the benefits of openness and contextual information" (p. 101). Thus, follow-up and probing questions were used in order to gain more depth and detail from the interviewee (Flick, 2014; Patten, 2005).

The interviews were, therefore, less formal than structured interviews and resembled a conversation (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Allowing the interviewee to discuss her or his perspective preserved a core requirement that the phenomenon was explained through the participant's viewpoint and not the researcher's (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Each of the interviews was audio recorded with the participant's permission, and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis. In order to further ensure the accuracy and intent of the responses, each participant was provided a copy of the interview transcript.

Human Subjects Concerns

Each participant was provided a copy of the interview transcript so that any discrepancies and/or discomfort with particular answers could be brought to my attention and withdrawn from the transcript. Each participant was informed of confidentiality before the data-gathering process. Pseudonyms were used to identify each respondent, and no information relating to their identity was released at any time.

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Data Analysis

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Thematic analysis is a method proposed for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes found in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patten, 2005). The process includes organizing data, describing it in detail, and interpreting it. The authors provide a step-by-step guide for researchers to use in order to develop a thematic analysis that "involves the searching across a data set…to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86). This method, according to Flick (2014), is compatible with various epistemological and theoretical conceptualizations, as it is founded on analyzing subjective viewpoints and on data coming from interviews. In order to systematically organize and code data into themes, Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program was used to organize the interviews and conduct the analysis.

The data were analyzed using the step-by-step guide outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) on Thematic Analysis. In the first step, I familiarized myself with the data by listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcripts of each of the interviews several times, making general notes for each. Next, I worked systematically through the data to note potentially significant statements and phrases from each transcript and began to generate an initial list of codes. At the conclusion of this step, I had a list of codes and associated data. In the third step of

the process, I began to search for themes by reading through each of the codes and the data to identify similarities or overlap between codes. In some instances, codes were collapsed or combined when similarities were present. At this point, themes and subthemes began to emerge in the data that were relevant to the research question or were repetitive enough to represent some meaning across the data. The fourth step of the process involved reading each set of excerpts for the themes and subthemes in order to ensure that the theme was appropriate for the associated data. In some instances, themes were broadened or codes were discarded or moved to a "miscellaneous" file. The next step is where I began to define my themes. This process involved reading the excerpts again and formulating a few sentences that described each theme separately and a few that described all of the themes together. In this step, I began to select quotes within each theme that I would use in my narrative of that theme. The final step of the analysis was the formation of Chapter 4, using the developed narrative and quotes to write the story of my data.

Limitations and Delimitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, the sample included seven K–12 education system leaders in Los Angeles. The findings, therefore, were generalizable only to this setting and to this specific set of participants. Secondly, there are few-to-no prior research studies on this topic and no research that focuses on Los Angeles top-level education leaders in transformative leadership roles. Next, since the dataset was self-reported, it cannot be independently verified. Finally, access to participants was limited by geography, timeframe of the study, and system requirements (i.e., due to time pressures of current top-level leaders and

the administrative challenges of accessing them as research participants, the study was limited to former LAUSD leaders).

The delimitations of the study were as follows: the criteria applied in the identification and selection process of the participants is based on subjective community consensus about the participants' level of success and impact in the K–12 education space in Los Angeles, and the population included in the research comprised participants I had access to within the timeframe allotted for the study. The sample only included the top-level leader; direct reports were not included in the study to corroborate the self-reported data provided. Despite the limitations and delimitations listed above, this research has the potential to be a platform on which to build in the future.

Closing

In this chapter, I outlined the process employed to gather and analyze the data. The case study design was the most appropriate methodology to answer the research question. Yin (2014) stated that case studies are the most appropriate methodology when the research question is seeking to understand a complex social phenomena or to understand the "why" behind behaviors that are beyond the researcher's control. It is also applicable, he maintained, when the question requires an "extensive and 'in-depth' description of some social phenomenon" (Yin, 2014, p. 4). This approach allowed me to understand the characteristics and behaviors of these transformative urban education leaders and resulted in very rich data to analyze.

In today's high-stakes environment, identifying, selecting, and developing the most successful transformative urban education leaders for systems like the Los Angeles Unified School District and related external organizations are of paramount importance. Failing to do so

has the potential to impact hundreds of thousands of students and families who, more often than not, live in communities of concentrated poverty and who represent ethnic minority groups.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Study Background

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the dispositions and beliefs that contribute to the success of urban public education top-level leaders in urban education settings. This study, which provides insights from the viewpoint of the transformative leaders, was also used to test a theoretical framework for transformative K–12 leaders. Understanding how leaders are successful in these very critical roles, particularly during a time when their jobs have become so demanding and increasingly complex, can result in the selection of effective individuals leading organizations that improve educational outcomes for hundreds of thousands of school children in Los Angeles.

This chapter presents the findings of the data collected through interviews with transformative education leaders in Los Angeles in order to answer the following research question: Despite great challenges, what leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs contribute to the persistence of transformative leaders in K–12 urban public education settings in Los Angeles?

For the purpose of this study, I interviewed seven Los Angeles-based top-level education leaders who have held senior level positions in their respective organizations. These organizations either provided direct K–12 education services for students in Los Angeles, or provided academic support services, advocacy services, or other education-related services. Of the nine leaders identified as potential participants, seven agreed to participate via an email

invitation All but one of the interviews were conducted over the phone for a duration ranging from 30 to 90 minutes, between June 1, 2017 and July 18, 2017.

The interviews were conducted in a way that provided for the participants to answer questions without interruption and allowed me to delve deeper into responses or veer from the interview guide. Participants were asked questions based on their experience as transformative leaders in Los Angeles. The questions were broken up into five sections, but often varied based on previous responses or topic areas that were specific to their experiences. The five sections covered the following:

1. Participants' background, in order to gain an understanding of their early history including upbringing, educational experiences, reason for choosing to work in this field, and influences that contributed to this decision;

2. Participants' career history so that I could gauge their level of intentionality behind working in a challenging urban environment, serving students of varied demographic groups;

3. Common characteristics found in the literature on transformative leadership;

4. Micro and macro issues that may impact student success; and

5. The role that social justice plays in their work

Each interview was recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptions service. I reviewed and edited the interview transcripts for accuracy using the audio recording of the interviews. Any response that was flagged as "off the record" during the interview was deleted from the transcripts. Pseudonyms were used to identify each participant in order to ensure confidentiality. The interview transcripts were then uploaded into the web-based qualitative data

analysis platform, Dedoose, where the text was read several times in order for the researcher to become familiar with the data. Once I was comfortable with the text, phrases and statements were used to generate codes that were later analyzed for repeated themes or patterns that emerged (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The remainder of this chapter includes an overview of the findings using themes that emerged from the data. There were four major themes that emerged from the data gathered. The first theme that was discussed is early experiences that impacted future trajectory. The second theme is power of positive communication, which includes three subthemes, communicating beliefs and vision, communicating hope, and communicating courage. The third theme is forming deep relationships with the community. The final theme is collaborative decision-maker and team builder. Exemplars were used to provide greater depth and understanding of those themes.

Participants' Backgrounds and Basic Ideologies

David

David had served as superintendent at four separate school districts across the country. In these roles, he focused on serving the most impacted populations, which include English language learners, students from low-income households, and special education students. He earned a national reputation for significantly narrowing the achievement gap between these populations and their peers. In addition to his superintendent positions, he had held several senior level positions with national organizations.

A quote is included as an indication of a core ideology. David stated, "You want to build advocacy, but you want that eventually to become agency in other people so that they can actually speak up and press against you."

Monica

Monica began her career as a teacher in an urban public school district and at the university level. Eventually, she assumed roles as a principal, superintendent, and several other senior-level positions in nonprofits across Los Angeles. She had volunteered as a commissioner and as a board member for several high impact nonprofits whose mission was to improve the quality of life and educational opportunities for children, youth, and their families.

Monica stated, "A transformative leader, I think, is one that can understand that the change that we seek isn't a one shot deal, and it's not the Christmas tree effect where you have so many different things going on." She also stated,

> It's that connection of people to the learning system as a whole. So you can't do it without changing people. You may have to change things too, but you have to change the way people think about themselves as leaders.

Nancy

Nancy worked in the education field her entire career, first starting as a nationally recognized teacher in a school district just outside of Los Angeles. She quickly realized that her role should be more focused on serving the needs of students who were not as well-resourced. Nancy decided to transition from her position as a teacher to that of a founding principal, vice president, chief operating officer, chief academic officer, and chief executive officer of a nonprofit that provided educational opportunities to Los Angeles's most impacted communities.

Nancy noted the need for change in "everything from the board structure, the district structure, the oppressive policies placed on schools, on individuals, on charters, on traditional public schools." Nancy stated the following:

Just in our city, there are forgotten communities in our city. I'll drive down Avalon and Watts, and this cannot be our country, but it is. Or drive just down the street from here, we have schools where there are trash, heaps of trash in people's neighborhoods. Where does that happen?

Julie

Julie currently served as the chief executive officer of an education organization that provided specialized opportunities for students across Southern California. Prior to serving in this role, she had held senior leadership positions at several other nonprofits, government, and business for-profit organizations. Significant to note were her tenures sitting on several boards at the local, state, and national level.

Julie stated the following:

It takes that delicate balance of arrogance and ignorance in the sense of you got to believe that you can do something that is impossible, and you've got to not understand how impossible it really is. And I say that facetiously, but I kind of mean it in the sense that people don't get into doing transformative stuff in education because they know how to do it. They get into it because it needs to be done and they find ways to put together skills and resources to address what they discover, and it's that kind of persistence and creativity that is the hallmark of the humans that do this work.

Matthew

Matthew's career in education came by way of an experience teaching abroad. As a result of the exposure to educational systems outside of the United States, he decided to devote his career to improving access to quality educational options to the most impacted communities in Los Angeles. As a result, he had served in CEO and president positions with organizations that operated both traditional and charter public schools, serving a total of 20,000 students a year. Under his leadership, graduation rates soared and national models for parent engagement initiatives were launched.

Matthew stated, "The biggest problems I think in urban districts, like people ask about L.A., 'Why is L.A. still not making that much progress?' I'm like, 'Five superintendents in 10 years, that's all you need to know.'" He also stated,

> My life's not going to be about making a lot of money. It's going to be about how do I impact as many people to have a better life as possible in my lifetime. That's literally my North Star and guiding light.

Sylvia

Sylvia had been nationally recognized for her commitment to community empowerment, coalition-building, and advocacy on behalf of children and families to increase access to excellent academic, health, and enrichment opportunities for Los Angeles's poorest communities. Her experience spanned the nonprofit sector, public charter school sector, and public service sector through a presidential appointment on a national commission.

Sylvia stated, "You've got to keep on kicking and screaming. You've got to keep on being that advocate. You've got to be that thorn in the side."

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Gabriel

Almost all of Gabriel's professional experience had been focused on organizing communities in South Los Angeles to improve health, education, and public safety conditions in order to transform society. His values were anchored in the power of collective action, leadership development, and nonviolence in order to advance social change. Gabriel spent 2 years at the U.S. Department of Education before returning to Los Angeles to implement a civic engagement strategy with African American and Latino communities.

Gabriel stated the following:

So, rich people don't just have the opportunity; they have the probability. They are likely to go to college. They don't just have the opportunity, like, it's almost a guarantee. And so, for me, transformative leadership in education is about creating probable statistics for our community. The opportunity, it's not enough.

Themes

Early Experiences That Impacted Future Trajectory

One of the most prevalent themes that emerged from the interviews was the impact that early childhood and early adulthood experiences had on each of the leaders' awareness of the inequities that exist in education, particularly as they related to low-income communities and communities of color, and the influence those experiences had had on their decision to focus their career on improving these realities. When I asked them to describe their upbringing, the responses quickly centralized on vivid childhood memories that were clearly still in their daily lives. Each of the participants attributed their decision to focus their careers on addressing these inequities to a specific experience or set of experiences, the social or political climate that was

prevalent during the time period they grew up in, or as a result of the way they were reared as children. Many of them connected their work to a moral or values-based calling. Some associated with a strong Catholic upbringing, and others vocalized the need to right the wrongs experienced by marginalized communities.

Religious affiliation showed up in the transcripts in many ways. Several participants mentioned attending Catholic schools during their formative years. They talked about growing up in "typical Catholic" households, and spent most every Sunday in church. The influence was most noticeable when, during the interviews, phrases such as "moral compass," "deep calling," and "moral mission" and "moral commitment . . . be a good human being" were frequently used.

Matthew. Matthew, who grew up in a strong Irish Catholic household, went to Catholic school for part of his education. He described going to church every Sunday with his family and hearing consistent messages about "a person who sacrificed his life for other people." He described this influence as follows:

Catholicism has been a big influence on why I do the work I do. I'm a very faith-values, faith-driven person, not as dogmatic, like some of the rules of the Catholic church don't make any sense, but the value thing makes good sense [I'm] very heavily influenced by faith. Early on, you know, you go every Sunday to church and you hear a message that the most important thing you can do in life is help other people have a better life. That's what you hear over and over. Your whole church is centered around a person who sacrificed his life for other people.

He later described being "faith driven" and needing a very strong passion and moral commitment to the work when engaging in the very difficult work he was in for a long time.

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Although his mother and grandmother were teachers, he did not attribute his decision to work in the education field to their experiences. In his early adult years, he traveled abroad and witnessed the horrible living conditions of the communities he lived in and decided to return to the United States and focus on working to improve the lives of as many people as possible. He decided that education would be where he would work, because he could use his skills to have a great impact. Although the community he grew up in was not urban, he wanted to work in an urban community such as New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. It was Los Angeles where the opportunity presented itself.

David. David also grew up in a family that he characterized as "stereotypical Irish-Catholic," where his daily routines consisted of school and church. He also described his household as "deeply rooted in labor membership," and he did not remember living a life of many resources. In fact, he described his parents as struggling financially. Catholicism influenced his upbringing, more as the mechanism that highlighted the racial strife that existed during his formative years. "Outside of the household," he stated, "the civil rights movement was in full swing—racism was rampant, desegregation and busing, ever present in conversations both in the community and in school." He was,

> acutely aware of that [racism] from a very early age. [He] was also acutely aware that, certainly while [his] own parents had lots of difficulty in their life, this desegregation and busing, in particular, was a flashpoint. [He] was also aware that this was not a common belief among some of my parent's friends and . . . family.

The civil rights movement continued on through his high school and college years. He used words such as "strong moral compass" and "deep calling and moral mission" when

describing why he decided to work in education. "It is for the other, and families who have historically been disserved," he said. When asked whether his upbringing influenced his decision to work in education, he answered, "No question about it." When probed whether working specifically in urban districts was also a deliberate choice, he also answered in the affirmative, "Definitely. That was absolutely a deliberate decision."

Monica. Although the civil rights movement had not reached the border town where Monica grew up, the racial disparities of the 1960s had had a profound impact on her. Her parents, and many other Mexican immigrants from her town, grew up during the time of the Cristero Rebellions—a religious war against the anticlericalism of the Mexican government. As a result, Monica described themselves as "very Catholic" and stated that church played a big role in their lives; they were required to go to mass twice a day as children. She grew up in a community just over the Mexican border where U.S. Border Patrol sightings were frequent and part of life. She recalled having to sit in the back of the class in her Catholic school, because that was the area reserved for children of Mexican heritage. She reflected on her seat placement and said that it was her Catholic upbringing that taught them (her and her peers) to "look the other way . . . [because] God loved them," so regardless of where she was sitting, she would "get to heaven and happiness was really not perfect."

Her family owned a small store in a very rural town about 100 miles from her home, so she spent a lot of time there. She credited a lot of her early influences to the Braceros (farm workers) that lived there. She described the "very open racism in that town against Mexicans and especially against low-income people." As a result of witnessing "so many horrible things" as a

young person, Monica stated that when she got to college, she recognized that there too racism was rampant and disparities between White students and Mexican students were commonplace.

Although she originally wanted to be a teacher like her sister, she thought she would become a lawyer after college so she could sue the systems and right the wrongs that existed. Her father, however, did not allow her to go to law school, because he said there were no women lawyers. She commented that

the 60s civil rights hadn't come to [where we lived]. We'd hear about the riots in Los Angeles, the walkouts [. . .] "they must be crazy," that's what my mother would say "What ARE they doing?" And of course, I was like clapping all the way . . . Yes!

Many years later, Monica moved to Los Angeles with her husband and young child. She began teaching in what she described as

a place like my sister's teaching environment that I'd gone to. It was the Southside for me, but it just happened to be the eastside of Los Angeles. And I knew I would be very happy with that kind of population I could fit in I would feel comfortable.

The majority of the rest of her career would be spent working in classrooms, schools, administration, and nonprofit advocacy in Los Angeles.

Gabriel. Racism was prevalent in David's and Monica's lives during the very distinct period of American history. Many years following the 1960s, it manifested in a different way in Gabriel's life. Gabriel grew up in a community just north of Orange County. He described his childhood as "very stable" and free from feeling economically insecure, though he did not feel like they were wealthy. Although there were good schools in the neighborhood, he recalled being "confronted by racism on a daily basis from the White families and kids." His parents were

immigrants with fifth-grade and high-school education. He credited his older brother for making him aware of racial injustices that existed inside and outside of their isolated community. His brother made him read articles on assimilation and acculturation as early as the age of 13, which made Gabriel aspire to be a lawyer, until he went to college during the 1990s, when Pete Wilson was the governor of California and Propositions 187, 209, and 227 made their way onto the state's ballot.

This period of time was particularly impactful on Gabriel. He was angry and in disbelief over the passage of the state ballots and the underlying messages rooted in racism and imperialism that fueled some of the rhetoric, but he quickly realized the power of coalition building when Black, brown, and Asian students on his campus banded together to organize and fight back. This prompted his lifelong career in community organizing with an initial goal of "radicalizing all these young people." The work in education then became, for Gabriel, part of a broader justice movement that had to be grounded in "the masses." He recalled a formative conversation with the organization's CEO shortly after graduating from college, which greatly influenced his perspective about what his role was in this movement. When he had just graduated from college, he wanted to work in South Los Angeles to teach the community about all of the theoretical frameworks and movements he had learned about in college. The CEO pulled him aside and told him that he needed to spend time in the community, learning from them, understanding the issues at a much deeper level, not educating them about issues they were quite familiar with. The focus, then, according to the CEO, was understanding what the solutions could be and working with the community to empower them so they could advocate for the solutions. He recalled, of that conversation,

So, that really had a huge impact on me. At that point I'd thought that made a lot of sense to me Like, who was I? Like, was my politics really grounded in people, or ideas? And I wanted it to be grounded in people. So, for others, they may have made a different choice, but for me, I wanted to make a choice and learn, and I did, and I'm so grateful, because then I put it all into perspective. And I learned from members more than me teaching. Like, I wasn't about educating or teaching members anymore. It was about building their own set of knowledge that they already had, and empowering them to demand change for what's right.

Sylvia. Like Monica, Sylvia was born in a border town just on the other side of the U.S.-Mexico Border in a community that was predominantly Latino and Filipino. She described the groups as geographically isolated from each other. As soon as they were able to, her immigrant mother convinced her father (who was from Michigan) to buy a home in a traditionally White community. Reflecting on this experience, Sylvia stated the following:

Race really set the context for my cultural upbringing. I really think I had a foot in two to three worlds. One middle class White America and the other in a much lower income Latino community. I was fortunate enough to spend equal amounts of times in both.

She remembered spending time with her mother's side of the family in Tijuana working at a church, orphanage, a senior center, and getting donations. She remembered going to nice restaurants, museums, and plays with her father's family. It was here that she began to understand the power that social capital has on upward mobility. Although she and her three siblings became college graduates, she was very aware that she was put on a college track in high

school, while they were not. Their persistence and resilience got them through many years of community college to graduation.

Nancy. Nancy grew up in a community not far from Sylvia's. She was also one of four children coming from a mixed-race family. This, she said, "brought a whole host of issues with it, especially since we didn't talk about race at all. I don't think my parents knew how to talk about race It brought about a lot of confusion, issues with confidence." She credited her parents for advocating on behalf of her and her three siblings by requesting inter-district transfers, which gave them entre into schools in the nearby affluent community. She and her three siblings all graduated from college and were doing very well "That happens by design," she said. "It doesn't happen by accident."

About the experience of going to these schools she said the following:

Completely changed the trajectory of my life. Just the fact that I had access to high quality instruction every day, high expectations, and a peer group that showed me a world I didn't know existed before I started going to school there, a world of resource, a world of plenty, a world where you walk into every room confidently, knowing you belong and you deserve to be there.

Although discouraged by her mother, who was also a teacher, Nancy naturally fell into teaching after college, after realizing that she wanted to help others, particularly young people who did not have the opportunities she was afforded during her schooling years. Nancy left the first district where she taught, a primarily affluent district, to assume a leadership role in a school system in South Los Angeles because she "knew [her] students would succeed with or without

[her] . . . [She] thought [she] needed to go somewhere where [she was] needed in a different way."

Julie. Although not of mixed race, Julie was raised in an extremely diverse household, the result of her parents fostering nearly 40 brothers and sisters. Her mother was a teacher and her father a juvenile probation officer and a minister. After college, she worked assigning community service to youth who were recently released from the juvenile justice system. It was through this experience, getting to know the youth and developing a sense of love for them, that she realized "these [were] the same kids that were [her] brothers and sisters." Although she had a brief career outside of education, she later returned and found that she "was actually able to make a real difference in that context, and making a difference was important to [her] because of the family [she] had grown up in and the values [she] had." Diversity was still a focus area for Julie. She believed very strongly that diversity breeds diversity, both in background and in skillsets.

Whether influenced by experiences within their households, in their communities, or as a result of social or political events, each of the participants in this study was clearly able to point to an event or series of events that impacted his or her decision to engage in the work of improving educational outcomes for those in urban communities.

Power of Positive Communication

The next theme that emerged from the data was that transformative leaders communicate messages of positivity. One participant, Sylvia, felt especially strong about the need to energize her team, parents, and students with positive energy every single day.

We know that there's so many challenges that come along the way. There's challenges that one doesn't even really think about, but it's like the challenges of hearing something horrible that happens to some of our kids. It's the challenges of managing a school of 200 adults and knowing that some of your team members are either dealing with stuff on a personal basis or not enough resources to get the job done the way they want. In addition to political challenges, financial challenges, logistical challenges, right? This is one of the biggest things I strive for in my personal leadership, is just always staying positive.

Positivity, she believed, contributes to creating a culture in the workplace where people want to be, despite the many challenges the environment presents. "I try to create every opportunity to energize people, because I want to retain really good people—from the teacher base to the back office folks...building that really solid team."

This message of positivity could be expressed in myriad ways. The following sections expand on the theme of positivity with three subthemes: (a) how leaders communicate their vision and their fundamental beliefs about the work, (b) how they communicate a sense of hope and display hopefulness about the outcomes of their work despite the many challenges, and (c) how leaders communicate courage in their role.

Subtheme: Communicating Beliefs and Vision

In this first subtheme, the participants in this study felt very strongly that leaders doing transformative work need to communicate very clearly and regularly (a) what their own personal beliefs are about the work and (b) to offer a strategy and a vision that others can attach themselves to. Doing so ensures clarity for all stakeholders, alignment of values and skillsets for

those who are part of the work vis-a-vis a job or career, and allows stakeholders to understand the basis for decisions that are made.

One of the most consistent messages from the participants related to communicating their beliefs about what is possible and who they are serving. Matthew considered himself a person who is deeply committed to an agenda that you can actually execute. A principle of leadership, he says, is to prioritize and focus on that agenda. That agenda, he stated, "has got to really be centered on what's best for kids. . . . . there is no confusion, whatsoever, about who you're working for." What he asked from anyone working with him, then, is that they come to the work with a deep underlying belief in the kids and the parents. He considered himself an

> incredibly optimistic leader, which I think is essential Hope and optimism I think, in this
> work in particular, are just a must. You've got to be as the head of the organization,
> you've got to be always the one that even when times are tough, comes in with energy,
> comes with a smile...in a genuine way, not in a fake way.

Similarly, David believed that transformative leaders must approach work in urban districts with a deep calling and moral mission. Being able to communicate this is a step that cannot be overlooked. "You can learn how to do fiscal budgeting. You can learn how to delegate. All that other stuff that we talk about I think can be grown," he said "But, if you're missing an unshakeable belief that every single young person can achieve at high levels, then I don't know how it works. I don't think you can grow that You must own that first."

When asked, "What is an essential characteristic a transformative leader should possess?" Julie stated, "A belief that all human beings have the right to a high quality education that suits them is really important." Her leadership style, she expanded,

most accurately falls under the servant leadership style in the sense that I lead because there's a responsibility to these students, and not in a noblesse oblige kind of way, but a responsibility to these students to ensure that they discover their own strengths and gain the skills to be successful independently, as opposed to from the context of "we're going to help these poor kids because we're better."

If communicating beliefs is an important practice for transformative leaders, then equally important is the need to communicate the vision and way forward to achieving results. Matthew admitted that it is difficult to have focus on one agenda, particularly because there is so much need in the type of schools he was committed to serving—those that have chronically failed the most vulnerable students. He reflected on the following when he struggled with this very task:

In education, if we are not deliberate about what we are focused on, and if we don't prioritize because we're under-resourced, then you will not make progress. That's one thing I want to put on the table, which I learned the hard way as well, was in the [organization I led] we [tried] to solve way too many problems right away, and if you try that in a resource-constrained environment, you do not do well. We learned that the hard way, and luckily we learned fast, so we adapted. You've got to be committed. You can solve all the problems, but recognize that it's going to take a long time, so pick the three that matter the most and get after it. Then the next three, and the next three.

David and Nancy agreed that having clarity of vision and communicating that vision is a critical responsibility of transformative leadership. David considered himself "a person who's deeply committed to an agenda." For him, the agenda is equity. Nancy reflected on leaders she deeply admired and who had a positive impact on her as staff, saying,

The leaders that I have been inspired by and moved me were very clear. . . . .you may not

agree with what they stood for, but they stood for something and they were going to do

whatever it took to make that happen.

When Sylvia discussed this topic, she too felt strongly that having very clear goals and

communicating those goals was essential, but not enough. She went a step further and said that

transformative leaders should have buy-in from all stakeholders on those goals and the strategies

that would be used to achieve them. Her rationale for this extra step of confirmation was to

accelerate impact given the limited time and human resources available. She felt that achieving

this would ensure "we're all on the bus heading in the same direction." That ability to set clear

objective strategies and galvanize the team toward those goals was extremely important to her.

For her, community-based movement building was part of the work, which she saw in the

following way:

> I don't move policy unless it has community connected to it, in terms of identifying the
>
> biggest priorities for our community and engaging them on information building, on
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> setting an agenda for what we think the solution is, and empowering them to be the
>
> advocates of the change.

Based on this study, the need to communicate beliefs and vision was not only about

implementing strategies, but also about ensuring clarity with those who are engaged in the work

about what the goals were and who was leading the group, both being equally important.

Subtheme: Communicating Hope

The second subtheme that emerged within the theme of power of positive communication

was the responsibility to communicate a sense of hope. This subtheme elicited the strongest and

most straightforward responses. The participants were well versed in the many challenges that are present when engaged in transformative work. Therefore, in their opinion, communicating hope was critical to keeping community morale up, to motivate each other to continue advancing on the agenda, and to actualize changes beyond the school walls.

Nancy described transformative work as being really hard, with a likelihood of discouraging more than encouraging people:

I think I'm engaged in the work of trying to create change, changing the odds for students. . . . I'm a part of an organization that at the core and the center is about changing the status quo . . . . I don't know that we always create the change that we want or as fast as we want, but it's definitely all that we aim to do every day here.

She felt that it was part of her job to point out all the successes and to remind her team of the impact their work was having on the students and families they served. She commented that,

Both just for the people who work here, for our families, I do have a tremendous amount of hope. I told myself the day that I stopped having hope, I should leave, because somebody else needs to come in who can write that narrative, because I think it's incredibly helpful.

She went on to describe her strategy for communicating that sense of hope to her team. She sent out regular communication via a newsletter that always started with a short description of something positive from around the organization, highlighting signs of success and reminding staff of the importance of the work they were doing to change the odds for students.

Similarly, Matthew characterized himself as an "incredibly optimistic leader," an essential, authentic characteristic, particularly when leading organizations doing difficult work or

when facing challenging times. "Hope and optimism, I think in this work in particular, are just a must." He stated that positivity and hope are particularly necessary at the school level because the work is so hard and has the potential to bring morale down.

As a leader in direct contact with students and schools every day, Sylvia admitted that communicating hope was not an easy task. She was constantly confronted by challenges, bad news, and circumstances that would derail even the toughest of leaders. However, she did not allow herself to remain in a space that took her too far away from remaining hopeful. She strove to "always, always" remain hopeful. She described it as part of her personal leadership.

You're allowed to not be happy, but you immediately need to connect that to the hopeful opportunity that will arise in the circumstance, because that's what we all need to persevere, to stay in this game, and stay motivated for better opportunities for our youth. I really, really do believe that in an education, change doesn't happen overnight, and that's why I talked about having that patient tenacity, because it's understanding that the outcome that I want tomorrow is not likely to happen tomorrow, but will likely happen in 10 years.

The following participants described the importance of remaining hopeful and communicating hope in a much more macro context—beyond the school walls, so to speak. Julie associated with the word "hope" in two ways. First, as a narrative that is necessary in order for her to be able to do what she does for a living; she stated,

You've got to believe that you can do something that is impossible, and you've got to not understand how impossible it really is, and I say that facetiously, but I kind of mean it in the sense that people don't get into doing transformative stuff in education because they

know how to do it. They get into it because it needs to be done . . . I have no other way of

living If I didn't believe the narrative of hope, I wouldn't be doing what I do for a living,

so yes . . . just plain old yes.

Second, in much the same way as Dr. Cornel West stated it in his 2008 book, *Hope on a

Tightrope: Words of Wisdom*, "You can't lead the people if you don't love the people," Julie

said,

> You go back to the word hope, but underlying the word hope is love, because love is
>
> what brings the strength to keep going through all the shit, and love defines why we're
>
> honest with each other and with the work that we do, because without that love and that
>
> love driving that honesty, we can't get through.

> Gabriel's extensive experience in the communities of South Los Angeles exposed him to

the tremendous power of hope on groups of people who had experienced generational depression

and deflation. He described hope as being the "antidote to injustice . . . [and] the most insidious

forms of psychological oppression." He pointed out that, without hope, generations of

community would not have been able to tolerate oppression the way that they have. "Hope," he

said, "builds resilience." With regard to doing transformative work, and as a "precondition for

transformation," hope is necessary. Without it, organized people cannot make bold demands and

will settle for less out of fear of never being able to realize their dreams.

> You can get people riled up around fear, you really can, and you can really hurt society.
>
> You can move a lot, but to operate from a place of fear as an example, is not grounded in
>
> a righteous, liberation ideology for all people. Hope is.

David, a much more matter-of-fact kind of leader, was very clear that although hope is essential, it is not enough. "Hope is not a responsible plan," he said, "it's an unbelievably essential element to building in others the ability to make situations and the context and the constructs much better for other people. It is necessary, but not sufficient." He warned that although he had witnessed hope translated into actions that had resulted in "phenomenal" outcomes for students, he had also experienced the opposite, where one's belief system caused his or her actions to overcome the hope they had. He referenced the famous American writer Studs Terkel by saying that the very last thing that people lose is hope. "We are a hopeful species, we're a hopeful people, we're a hopeful collection. It's a long way of saying I think it's really important to have it and speak about it and engender it, but that's not enough."

Subtheme: Communicating Courage

The final subtheme that emerged in this section is the need for transformative leadership to communicate courage. A distinguishing element between this study and other leadership studies is the focus on transformative leaders working specifically in urban communities, where the challenges present themselves regularly and the resources available are scarce. Communicating courage, both verbally and physically, was a recurring theme mentioned in the context of this specific work. Where communicating beliefs and vision contributed to the development of agendas and strategies, and communicating hope elevated levels of motivation and encouragement in the face of difficulty and challenge, courage was a characteristic that participants felt needed to be communicated and displayed constantly. Courage drove action, and action drove results.

Courage, Gabriel felt, was a necessary characteristic for anyone leading work similar to his—transformational community-based work. Lacking courage, he said, would force leaders to "go for the lowest common denominator, and our kids deserve people to make bold, courageous steps that upset folks. Sometimes it upsets your friends and sometimes it upsets your enemies. Either way, you have to be courageous." Taking bold, courageous steps toward the transformative is, as he stated,

> a pretty implied revolution. Like, it implies qualitative change, like you're turning water into steam, like you're turning a caterpillar into a butterfly. So, that's pretty transformative...it's a pretty significant word. So, if we're talking about being a transformative leader in education, you're completely turning it upside down. You're saying that you're going to pour more money to poor kids and less money to rich kids. You're going to do everything you can to provide a well-rounded education. I just think that, for me, it's an acknowledgement that it's going to take a pretty significant change inside the schools and outside of the schools to achieve your goals.

Accomplishing the kind of change Gabriel described as transformative required leaders to muster the courage to also assume responsibility for bringing people together to address the external conditions that impact what happens inside the school walls. He acknowledged that this kind of courageous leader is rare. In fact, he did not think that Los Angeles had had enough of the kind of transformative leadership, in the purist sense, needed to take on "the 1%." He attributed this void to the lack of preparation of young leaders who are courageous enough to be radical thinkers and revolutionaries.

Like Gabriel, Nancy associated courage with the decision-making responsibility of transformative leaders. In addition to having a strong moral compass, Nancy felt that leaders have to be courageous. You can't be in it to keep your job. If you're in it to keep your job, you're not going to be courageous enough. You have to have thick skin because people just are rude and crude.

In this particular conversation, she was referring to the need to challenge the Los Angeles Unified School District on policies that had the potential to adversely affect the students and families her organization served. She recognized that however unpopular this may make her to the district, she knew her staff, teachers, leaders, and students were watching the decision she would make about mandates such as wanding students each day for weapons, for example.

Sylvia, Julie, and David talked about courage in the context of the complexity and difficulty of transformative work in an urban environment like Los Angeles. Here, leadership had to be courageous to stay in the challenging work. Sylvia admitted, "It's hard to serve communities under the hard conditions of school transformation." She warned that a lack of courage could make it easier for transformative leaders to succumb to low expectations in the face of defeats or blows that they might be dealt.

David felt that it was critical to be both courageous and vulnerable. "I think they're both critically important. I think you need to be very much courageous, and also willing to be vulnerable. . . It takes courage," he said, "to be able to communicate very clearly, both what and how and why you're doing something, but also a deep calling and moral mission to this work and being able to communicate that."

Forming Deep Relationships with the Community

A transformative leader's relationship with the communities he/she is serving, based on this study, is tightly interwoven into every aspect of the work In this third theme, each of the participants described a moral, loving, respectful, deep understanding of the community that must be present in order for the changes to take root and become a permanent part of daily life. The participants in this study described "community" in two distinct ways: first, the professional community (i.e., the team, the department, the district); second, the geographic region and demographic group being served.

The strongest responses came from the participants whose frame of reference of "community" was from the latter description. In many of those instances, the relationship became one in which the "owner" of the work was the community and the leader was simply the conduit for ensuring progress was made in the right direction In either case, although the leaders made decisions on behalf of their organizations, it was clear that the community must always be at the center of it all.

Gabriel and Sylvia had similar points of view when referencing "community" and the need for leaders to develop deep relationships with stakeholders to build an understanding of the social, political, and economic events, both current and historical, that have shaped those communities. Without engaging in these steps, the work cannot be transformative Gabriel described his leadership as "grounded in the masses," meaning that his role is to serve as an authentic representative of the people. He did not approach the work this way initially, however. When he first started with his organization, he sought to educate the community, from an academic perspective, about the myriad challenges it faced. His CEO at the time strongly

recommended that he spend time getting to know the people that lived there, listening to their stories, and understanding the daily struggles they faced. Only then, through this lens, would he be able to work on behalf of the people.

Gabriel stated,

I guess the last thing I would say, particularly in the field that I'm in, our job is to be servant leaders, in that we're here to serve the people, and you have to have love for the people, and a respect for the people, a belief in their capacity, and that ultimately, we are here to serve others, not ourselves. So, our work is at the service of helping any people that have been marginalized, and so that's got to be a core component of our leadership.

In this same conversation, he remarked on the shortage of transformative leaders at the most senior levels in Los Angeles. When asked what contributed to that, he discussed the absence of a leadership pipeline made up of individuals *from* the community. For example, movements like those that took place in the 1960s created strong leaders from the communities in which they took place. What is lacking, according to Gabriel, therefore, are transformative leaders that "come from us. Like, I think [this leader] is probably the closest. But they haven't come from our movements." When probed more, essentially, the view was that senior leaders in Los Angeles were not born, so to speak, from the communities they seek to serve.

Sylvia's entire career was rooted in the belief that transformative work must be advanced by the community, and her role, or her organizations' role, was that of a conduit of the people's voices

I was very, very fortunate to have a board that believed in that authentic community engagement. I am really, really proud and continue to pay homage to community-based

movement building and community-based policy initiatives. For me now, it's become

second nature. I don't move policy unless it has community connected to it, in terms of

identifying the biggest priorities for our community and engaging them on information

building, on setting an agenda for what we think the solution is, and empowering them to

be the advocates of the change...the strength of our success [is] premised on community

engagement.

Having a board that prioritizes forming deep relationships with community and engaging and

empowering them has given Sylvia the resources needed to realize this dynamic in an authentic

and transformative.

David described the recognition and honoring of cultural power that is "of and by a

community" as "going a long way to the betterment of a system." Successes and celebrations,

therefore, should be "owned by the community and not the leader." From the conversation, the

term *community* seemed to include both the team engaged in the work and those directly

impacted by it.

Based on the data, the central purpose of forming deep relationships with community

centered around the premise that transformative work, from the perspective of the participants,

should be informed by the community. For this to happen, leaders must first work to form deep,

authentic relationships. Failing to do so creates the conditions for the development of agendas

that are driven by individuals and not the community.

Collaborative Decision-Maker and Team-Builder

The final major theme that I gleaned from the data was that transformative leaders are

collaborators, specifically during the decision-making process, and they felt a responsibility to

develop the individuals on their teams. A section of the interview guide included questions about how transformative leaders make decisions, and specifically, whether one would aspire to reaching consensus on decisions. The responses below illustrate the general agreement that although consensus is rare, transformative leaders cannot, and should not, fail to own the responsibility to make decisions if unable to reach consensus. Each of the respondents did, however, emphasize the practice of gathering as much information as possible on the topic and listening to perspectives from their teams in order to make informed decisions. For some participants, ensuring that the right staff was seated around the table was also important. Equity of representation and voice was seen by some as critical.

Equity of inclusion is an important characteristic of transformative leaders, according to the participants, but equally important is the obligation those leaders felt to develop their teams or staff into the next generation of leaders and to practice good professional development for these individuals.

Leader as decision-maker. When making decisions for the organization, Gabriel based the need for consensus on the magnitude of the decision before him. Although ultimately, as the leader of the organization, the responsibility rested on him to make decisions, the process, according to him, differed depending on the magnitude. At the time of this interview, the organization he led claimed a significant victory on behalf of students and families in LAUSD. When asked how he made decisions that are significant, he stated,

> For me, it's really important. When it's a very big decision, I can absolutely go against consensus, but more important to me is just that I talk to our core stakeholders. I don't want to make decisions alone. I think that's a problem. So our decision-making model is

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one of collaboration and collectivizing the information, and where we can reach

consensus, great, but the expectation isn't necessarily like, "We've all voted to do this, go

do it," right? I think that everyone has—and I have to maintain it but—has trust in my

leadership. And so even if I stepped against what they did, when we come out, we all

come out together.

It is important to note here that Gabriel's organization was rooted in the collective, and there

were processes in place to ensure that there was equity when it came to who sits at the table, who

speaks, and how collaboration is actualized. In this way, he could be assured that the right people

were informing decisions and that they had had the opportunity to share their insights.

Each of the other participants made decisions in similar ways, and also agreed that

consensus is not a requirement when making decisions, no matter the magnitude. As a regular

practice, however, each of the leaders leaned on their teams to inform the process and deliberate,

when appropriate. Matthew described his approach to decision-making in a much more nuanced

way than the rest of the participants. He shared that not all teams could share in the decision-

making or were involved in all decisions. Sometimes it was not appropriate and other times, the

expertise did not align with the task at hand. What was important to him was the process of

including the right people around a particular topic.

[I try] to make sure people realize that it's a fair and transparent process on how these

decisions are being made, and what different people's roles are. I also think when you're

doing particularly turnaround work, decisions that everyone actually agrees on, on

tougher issues, tend to be tougher actually. . . . Also understanding of different roles and

understanding that some decisions everyone may not actually all agree on. That's okay too, but once you make it you got to move forward as a team and move the work forward.

When the question was posed to Sylvia, she agreed,

No, consensus is rare. I have a party if I get consensus. Break out the champagne, cause. It's unusual. But I think what people appreciate is an open conversation where everyone's opinion is respected and contribute to forming the ultimate answer. Not one of us is going to get every element of what we think the right goal is or what the right attributes are, but if I've given everyone the opportunity to chime in and then we agree on what we ultimately choose . . . I always, as a leader, retain veto power I tell them. But, I only use the veto power on things that I think are going to get us in trouble, not just I have a preference for doing x, y, and z.

David made it very clear that he did not believe that consensus is necessary. Although it certainly helps if the team has strong consensus, it is not required. He explained why:

At the end of the day, the big decisions are the responsibility of the leader, and how you come to make that decision is important. I believe that the way I led was, I am eventually going to be responsible for making decision X. I want to know as much as possible so I can make the best decision. We're not going to vote as a team on this. You're going to give me all the input you possibly can, and it will be my responsibility to take that input and make a decision, and then we're going to execute on that.

He went on to say that, more often than not, the teams he worked with respect and appreciate both the approach and the willingness of the leader to make what oftentimes are critical decisions impacting thousands of students and families.

Nancy's approach was very similar to the others,' with one distinction—she felt that the more she was elevated as a leader within the organization, the less she should be making decisions on her own. She stated the following:

I would say I'm a very collaborative decision maker. What that means is I'm gathering input from as many people as possible to make the right decision. At the end of the day, I know ultimately I have to make the call. Consensus would be great but you can't always wait for consensus so, if I have a coalition of the willing and enough people behind me saying, 'This is the right direction to go,' and I've gotten enough input then I'm comfortable moving forward.

Leader as team-builder. I discussed earlier that the participants in this study felt a sense of responsibility to develop their team and the importance of engaging in this work as a team. Development of the team, in this case, was seen as a way to build a pipeline of leaders to either eventually take over the work or as a means to advance the work faster, as a collective. Building a team that was diverse in skillsets in order to provide a more comprehensive approach to the work was also important. One thing was clear: transformative work was also about building agency and advocacy with your team, empowering them to become leaders in their own right.

Having led schools for most of the first half of her career, Monica reflected, "I saw that my strength as the principal really depended on the strength of my teachers, and I looked for ways to support them." She added,

I looked at parents as leaders in their homes, children as leaders in their neighborhoods, and that's the story that I would try to tell them. We all have power within us to cause

some change to happen and to make sure that our changes are substantial and deep rooted.

Gabriel, whose organization focused on galvanizing the collective to challenge injustices, felt strongly that an equally important mission was developing leaders who would rise in the ranks and assume local, state, and national offices and truly represent their communities. Doing so, he believed, was truly transformative.

> Well, I believe that we have to build a pipeline of leadership from an early age. I think that this is an exciting period, where we're going to be developing pretty radical leaders, because of who we have in the White House [current 45th President of the United States]. It has forced people that would otherwise not consider these larger questions in their role in a way that we haven't seen in a long time. Generally everybody's a leader, and everybody can be a leader, and there is no crystal ball, and there is no certain people are just more gifted than others. I don't believe in that; I think that we all have the capacity to lead. We all have different strengths and weaknesses that we bring to bear as leaders, but we're all leaders. I think that's a very important principle of ours.

In practice, working in teams was, again, a focal point of his organization, meaning the collective worked together and leveraged each other's strengths to accomplish the goals. I mentioned earlier that Gabriel and the team had what I called a process to ensure each person has a place to exhibit their leadership. He put it in this way:

> I guess the last principle I might share . . . [is] just that we bring equity to our leadership. So, constantly thinking about equity in everything that we do. Who's in the room? How often do we speak? Who's not talking? Who's being hired? Who's not being hired? The

campaigns we work on. So I think, every layer of it, the way we talk about our messaging

is a really important piece of ours is just to bring equity. Equity's not just about the

policies that we fight for; it's the way in which we carry our work, right?

Matthew saw it as his responsibility not only to develop leaders, but also to create an

environment in which they would thrive. He spoke of the importance of positive environments,

of supporting development, and of empowering the team to approach the work creatively.

I also believe strongly you have to empower people. Especially in schools and school

systems. You've got to give people a lot of room to do their job, not micromanage them.

Make sure their expectations are really clear, but then let them soar.

His idea on the way to do that was to

give them a lot of room to lead and be who they are. Support them, help them, intervene

when they're not doing well, hold them accountable when they're making really bad

decisions, but give them the space to do that.

David was a "big believer that not a single thing happens because of the leader." Instead,

he believed,

It happens because the team the leader builds. My philosophy is very much about

assembling and building an amazing team. Work gets done through and with and by

teams. . . . I think a leader, in these cases, is also someone who gives voice until that

voice is owned by others. So, they're not afraid to speak.

Similarly, Nancy's approach was not only about assembling a team whose skill set

matched the role but was also about growing capacity within the organization as a way to

achieve goals and have longevity and consistency in leadership.

I think you've got to be able to bring people together and bring people with you along the way. It can't be about one person, so you've really got to figure out how do you grow capacity and a will within your organization or within groups of people to do that work with you . . . people will say, if I manage you, I'm an advocate, I will advocate for you through and through, and I will give of my time and my resources to make sure that you are successful. I like for people to know we have a deep bench here, and so I try not to be the person out in front. I like to push people forward and let people lead in various aspects.

Besides the acknowledgement that transformative work is a team effort and meeting goals requires members of that team to use their skill to the highest levels, Julie honed in on the need to push for diversity of that team

There's another important thing, and that is that I seek out diverse staff. I like to have a staff that is diverse in terms of their skill sets, in terms of their ideas, in terms of their ethnicity, in terms of their language base, because that diversity has always made difficult work easier.

Diversity, she went on to explain, breeds diversity, and the significance in that is not only in skills that are brought to the table, but that the team begins to truly reflect community.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarized the patterns that were revealed from the data collected during the seven interviews I conducted with the participants of this study. Four major themes emerged. The first theme was early experiences that impacted future trajectory. The second theme was power of positive communication, which includes the three subthemes of

communicating beliefs and vision, communicating hope, and communicating courage. The third theme was forming deep relationships with the community. The final theme was collaborative decision-maker and teambuilder.

At first glance, the characteristics that emerged from the data may, to some, seem no different than the typical responsibilities required of good leaders, generally. All leaders should communicate, should engage with their community, make decisions, and approach the work as a team. An important distinction, however, that I found with this group of transformative leaders was that they each had a connection to the work that was anchored in experiences, and for most these experiences were as early as childhood. This work was personal to them, so implementation of the four themes discussed in this chapter was carried out in the most authentic, deep-rooted way possible.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The job of an education system leader in an urban school district is becoming more demanding and complex at the same time that districts like the one in Los Angeles are experiencing frequent turnover. Filling these roles with the right leaders is critical to the success of hundreds of thousands of students. The research findings of this study shed some light on the leadership dispositions that contribute to the success of transformative urban education system leaders in Los Angeles. The following research question drove the study: Despite great challenges, what leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs contribute to the success of transformative leaders in K-12 urban public education settings in Los Angeles?

This chapter discusses the findings of my study through the lens of the transformative urban education leadership framework. As discussed in Chapter 4, four major themes emerged in this study. The first theme was about the participants' early experiences that impacted their future professional trajectory in education. The second theme centered around the power of positive communication. This theme includes three subthemes: communicating beliefs and vision, communicating hope, and communicating courage. The third theme was the leaders' need to form deep relationships with the community. The final theme was the leader as collaborative decision-maker and team builder. (See Table 3.)

Upon review of the literature on education leadership frameworks, I found that there was a dearth of research that applied specifically to the unique position of top-level leaders in urban education settings. In response to this void, using the existing literature, I developed a new

framework specific to urban education system leaders using aspects of frameworks for leadership

for multicultural education, transformative leadership, and leadership for social justice.

Table 3

Leadership Dispositions, Characteristics, and Personal Beliefs of Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework

Characteristics	Supporting authors
Foundational Belief - All students can achieve at high levels - Asset-based view of talents and strengths - Environments and relationships free of racism and bias - Goal of education is to empower	Nieto, 1999
Democratic - Leadership resides in relationship with others - Change social relationships in order to encourage engagement in democracy	Freire, 1970; Foster, 1989; Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003
Dialectic - Dialogue from a place of love and value - Willingness to learn from others - Relationships in solidarity with the community	Freire, 1970; Foster, 1989; Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003
Critique of Structures, Behaviors, and Dispositions - Challenge power and privilege - Challenge inequality	Freire, 1970; Foster, 1989; Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003
Consciousness of Power Structures - Instigate structural transformations - Awareness of micro and macro conditions that contribute to student underachievement	Nieto, 1999; Banks & McGee Banks 2003; Marshall & Olivia, 2010; Foster as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Starrat as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Kumashiro

Counterhegemonic Vision for Education • Communicate vision for the future	Burns, 1978; Banks, 2002, Shields 2010; Marshall & Oliva 2010; Foster as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Starrat as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Kumashiro
Focus on Marginalized Groups • Attention to the oppression of the "other" (e.g., students who are underserved, underrepresented, undereducated	Freire 1970, 1989; Marshall & Oliva 2010; Foster as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Starrat as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Kumashiro

In this new framework, transformative urban education leaders (a) work to foster democratic and dialectic environments; (b) maintain a moral obligation to challenge the status quo by actively critiquing internal and external structures, behaviors, and dispositions; (c) acknowledge and have a broad consciousness of the power structures at play; (d) articulate a counterhegemonic vision for education; and (e) maintain focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups.

The remainder of this chapter is organized starting with the discussion of findings, the alignment to the Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework, followed by implications these findings might have on Los Angeles urban education, and recommendations for additional research in this area. The chapter ends with a conclusion in which I share my thoughts on the importance of this study on my own professional trajectory and ways I believe we can attract and retain transformative education leaders in Los Angeles.

Discussion of Findings

Leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs. Table 3 summarizes the seven leadership dispositions, characteristics, and personal beliefs that define my transformative urban education leadership framework. It was through the lens of these dispositions,

characteristics, and beliefs that I conducted my study and analyzed the results. After conducting

an analysis of the transcripts from the seven interviews with Los Angeles-based top-level

education leaders who had held senior level positions in their respective organizations, four

major themes emerged from the data. A snapshot of the major themes and subthemes from this

study are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4

Leadership Dispositions, Characteristics, and Personal Beliefs of Transformative Leaders in Los Angeles From Participant Interviews

Theme	Subtheme
1. Early experiences that impacted future trajectory	
2. Power of positive communication	
	• Communicating beliefs and vision • Communicating hope • Communicating courage
3. Forming deep relationships with the community	
4. Collaborative decision-maker and teambuilder	

Theme 1: Early Experiences that Impacted Future Trajectory

One of the earliest themes that emerged from the interviews was not only that early

childhood and early adulthood experiences influenced each of the leaders' trajectory into the

education field, but also the degree to which those experiences remained at the forefront of their

work, particularly as they related to a commitment to address the inequities that exist in

education in low-income communities and communities of color. Most of the participants'

experiences related to events centered on racial disparities, discrimination, and inequities that

resulted from imbalanced power structures at play.

In her work *Leadership for Multicultural Education*, Sonia Nieto (1999) stated that we must consider the micro and macro level issues when applying her definition of multicultural education in the socio-political context. The overwhelming majority of my participants, through their early life experiences, were intimately aware of the micro and macro issues in place that contributed to inequalities in schools, because they experienced or saw them first-hand. The Civil Rights Movement, and the repercussions of it, was a particularly significant period in American history and shaped the lens through which the overwhelming majority of my participants viewed their role in this work. Racial discrimination, school segregation, bussing, and integration were all experiences discussed either directly or indirectly by the participants. Banks and McGee Banks (2003) talked about the sociopolitical context that education exists within and is, as a result of its central position, influenced by those greater social and political forces. Educational structures, therefore, create micro trends that are reflective of the macro movements such as the Civil Rights Movement.

Religious affiliation, most notably Catholicism, and its underlying values also not only impacted several participants' career trajectory, but continued to be an anchor of their decision-making process. They spoke of their work in urban Los Angeles as being morally driven and values-based, vocalizing the need to right the wrongs experienced by marginalized communities. Although righting the wrongs was a common theme vocalized by all participants, it was more strongly noted among those who specifically spoke of their affiliation with a religious group.

Theme 2: Power of Positive Communication

Communication was a theme that permeated throughout the interviews. Each leader shared the importance of ensuring stakeholders at all levels received regular communication

from them. Although the topics leaders must communicate are not always pleasant, they owned the responsibility of being the face and voice of the organization. One distinction they made was the need to remain positive, especially in light of the many challenges faced by the leaders. Three subthemes within positive communication emerged; they will be discussed below.

Subtheme: Communicating beliefs and vision. In Marshall and Oliva's (2010) extensive research on leadership for social justice, they highlighted characteristics that emphasized the impact that moral values, justice, equity, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation have on the education of students, and specifically students who are underserved, underrepresented, and those who experience oppression in schools. One subtheme that emerged from the data centered around communication that informed stakeholders what the leader stood for, what they valued as individuals, what they believed about the population they were serving, and what their vision was for the future of education in Los Angeles.

One participant made a statement that, as a member of a team at a previous organization, she wanted to know that there was alignment between (a) her own beliefs and vision with (b) those of the leader. It was important for her to be able to connect with the leader's beliefs and vision if she was to be a part of the team informing decisions. Marshall and Olivia's (2010) research, then, is significant in that those characteristics may drive the leader, but it falls short in calling for the leaders to communicate what drives them. In Burns's (1978) seminal work, *Leadership*, he talks about transformative leaders having a vision that they use to mobilize people to action.

Subtheme: Communicating hope. Along the same lines, the idea of communicating hope, particularly during challenging times, was viewed as an important act that would provide a

sense of security to stakeholders—security that the leader understood the challenges and was willing to step in to address them. In a discussion on transformative educational leadership, Shields (2010) theorized that transformative leaders are first driven by questions of power and privilege that maintain inequities and injustice In the leaders' critique of these inequitable practices, they inspire hope in the individual and in the community.

Subtheme: Communicating courage. The final subtheme that surfaced from the theme *power of positive communication* was the need for the leader to communicate courage. This was typically displayed by the leader's willingness to make difficult decisions that were in the best interest of the students and families being served. Although this particular theme did not fit with the literature, it can be argued that leaders who are transformative display courage on a regular basis by the very nature of the work that needs to be accomplished.

Theme 3: Forming Deep Relationships with the Community

From the interview data, forming deep relationships with community emerged as a consistent theme for each participant. There was a clear delineation, however, between the manner in which this concept was interpreted and practiced. Some participants, when describing deep relationships with community conceptualized this as forming connections with colleagues within their professional communities. Others interpreted *community* as students and families of the students in their schools. Still formed deep relationships with community in a way that was anchored in relationships formed within the geographic communities where the students and families lived. These relationships were inclusive of connections with other social, political, and religious entities.

Not only must transformative leaders form deep relationships with community that are more aligned with the third approach but, according to several of the study's participants, the work should be anchored in and informed by the community's needs. Freire's (1970) statement that "the people must find themselves in the emerging leaders, and the latter must find themselves in the people" (p. 163) indicated his belief that this relationship is unavoidably dependent on and directed toward leaders' solidarity with the people. He wrote, "Solidarity is born only when the leaders witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people" (Freire, 1970, p. 129). It is in the development of this relationship, rooted in love and faith, that true leadership is manifested.

Freire (1970, 1998) reiterated this concept when he wrote about the dialogue that was required for leaders to have solidarity with the people. This dialogue, he stated, must be rooted in a deep love for the people in order to be authentic. Freire (1970) claimed that dialogue "cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people . . . Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself" (p. 89). This concept of forming relationships rooted in love was shared by at least two of the participants in this study. They were explicit in explaining that in order to have the kind of relationship that is authentic and rich, love had to be present. From love came respect for the individuals and honor for cultures. In order to dialogue with a person, the leader must operate from a place of love and value for the humanity of the individual.

Theme 4: Collaborative Decision-Maker and Teambuilder

The question was posed to the study's participants to describe their decision-making process and, specifically, whether consensus was a requirement in order for the leader to make

decisions. Overwhelmingly, the transformative leaders in this study agreed that consensus was not necessary to achieve; they stated that the responsibility to make decisions, particularly difficult decisions, rested on the shoulders of the leader. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (1998) stated that leaders who strive to create change in a system must do so with a sense of humility— willing to learn from the people and have faith in them. While there was an overall rejection of the concept of consensus, there was also overall agreement that a critical leadership practice included gathering as much information about a topic as possible before making a decision. This process varied slightly among participants, but generally involved dialoguing with the team.

Foster (1989), one of the first writers to talk about transformative educational leadership—different than transformational leadership, contended that leadership should be separated from the leader because he believed that leadership "does not reside in an individual, but in the relationship between individuals" (Foster, 1989, p. 46). He challenged the concept that leadership only resided in one individual at the top, and instead stressed the quality of the interpersonal relationships within and between individuals. The leader's role, therefore, is to engage in transformative practices that change those social relationships and empower others to engage in democratic practices.

This understanding pushes leadership further away from management (Van Oord, 2013) and toward a more distributive model. Interestingly, during these conversations, some participants went a step further when describing their decision-making process—ensuring there was equity when assembling individuals and/or organizations around the table when decisions were being made. One leader's organization also had protocols in place to assure all had the opportunity to speak during discussions. Freire (1970), Foster (1989), Shields (2010), and

Weiner (2003) spoke to these topics when they discussed leadership dispositions that included democracy and dialogue.

As part of the discussion around decision-making, many of the leaders verbalized their obligation to their teams as it related to professional development. In some conversations, the purpose for developing skills was solely to the benefit of the employee. However, the vast majority of the leaders thought about and planned for developing leadership skills in their teams for the purpose of either strengthening the team's capacity or as a way to develop the next generation of leadership.

Alignment to the Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework

At the outset of this study, I stated that I used elements of existing frameworks to develop a new framework called Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework. This framework calls for transformative system-level education leaders in urban communities to (a) work to foster democratic and dialectic environments; (b) maintain a moral obligation to challenge the status quo by actively critiquing internal and external structures, behaviors, and dispositions; (c) acknowledge and have a broad consciousness of the power structures at play; (d) articulate a counterhegemonic vision for education; and (e) maintain focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups.

When viewed through the lens of Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework (TUELF), each theme gleaned from the data is aligned to one or several elements of the TUELF. Table 5, below, shows the four themes found in the data, the elements of the TUELF that they align to, and the research found in the literature to support the framework. Some

elements of the TUELF do not align entirely; in this case, the table below illustrates the areas of

the element that align vis-a-vis the italicized bullet points.

Table 5

Alignment of Leadership Dispositions, Characteristics, and Personal Beliefs of Transformative Leaders in Los Angeles From Participant Interviews and Transformative Urban Education Leadership Framework

Research study themes	Transformative urban education leadership framework (TUELF)	TUELF-aligned research
Early experiences that impacted future trajectory	Focus on Marginalized Groups *Attention to the oppression of the "other" (e.g., students who are underserved, underrepresented, undereducated*	Freire 1970, 1989; Marshall & Oliva 2010; Foster as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Starrat as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Kumashiro (2000)
Power of positive communication	Foundational Belief • *All students can achieve at high levels* • *Asset-based view of talents and strengths* • Environments and relationships free of racism and bias • *Goal of education is to empower*	Nieto, 1999
	Critique of Structures, Behaviors, and Dispositions • *Challenge power and privilege* • *Challenge inequality*	Freire 1970; Foster 1989; Shields 2010; Weiner 2003
	Counterhegemonic Vision for Education	Burns 1978; Banks, 2002; Shields 2010; Marshall & Oliva 2010; Foster as cited

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	• *Communicate vision for the future*	in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Starrat as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Kumashiro (2000)
Forming deep relationships with the community	Democratic • *Leadership resides in relationship with others* • *Change social relationships in order to encourage engagement in democracy*	Freire, 1970; Foster, 1989; Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003
	Dialectic • *Dialogue from a place of love and value* • Willingness to learn from others • *Relationships in solidarity with the community*	Freire, 1970; Foster, 1989; Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003
	Consciousness of Power Structures • *Instigate structural transformations* • *Awareness of micro and macro conditions that contribute to student underachievement*	Nieto 1999; Banks & McGee Banks 2003; Marshall & Olivia 2010; Foster as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Starratt (1994) as cited in Marshall & Oliva 2010; Kumashiro (2000)
Collaborative decision-maker and teambuilder	Democratic • *Leadership resides in*	Freire, 1970; Foster, 1989;

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relationship with others	Shields, 2010; Weiner, 2003
• Change social relationships in order to encourage engagement in democracy	
Dialectic	
• Dialogue from a place of love and value	Freire 1970; Foster1989; Shields 2010; Weiner 2003
• *Willingness to learn from others*	
• Relationships in solidarity with the community	

Implications for Los Angeles Urban Education

The findings of this study present several implications that could have an impact on the way leaders are identified, selected, and supported in the current educational landscape in Los Angeles. First, it is clear from the interviews and from the turnover of leaders in Los Angeles, that there is a need to build a pipeline of top-level leaders who are prepared to assume positions when the opportunity presents itself. Given the number of students served by both the district and its partners around Los Angeles, vacancies that remain unfilled for a long period of time can be detrimental to the services provided to the students and families. There are programs from several established national organizations whose focus is to provide these types of leaders; however, there is no reason why Los Angeles cannot create its own program to train transformative leaders specific to this region. I believe the unique challenges presented in a city

like Los Angeles merits the development of its own program that fosters leaders from within the city's limits.

Similarly, absent participation in some existing external programs, there seems to be a lack of professional development for existing transformative leaders. One participant said she informally would ask peers she knew for support or partnership to problem solve issues she was unfamiliar with. Much of the professional development for top-level leaders comes by way of personal and professional relationships they leverage with peers who they can call on during times of struggle.

With regard to the placement of transformative leaders in senior-level positions, there is an opportunity for human resources departments and recruiters to use this study to inform screening protocols, interview guides, and placement procedures to place the right leaders in the appropriate positions. I would recommend that this process include evidence of the major themes that emerged from this study. Answering questions in interview panels by saying the right things is simply not enough. The inquiry must be deeper; evidence of understanding and execution must be clear. One participant in the study said that one could learn (or teach) the technical skills required to run a district or an organization, but if at the leader's core, there lacked a clear understanding of whom they are serving and a vision for what that service looked like, the leader has already lost.

Finally, the role of community-based organizations that support and advocate on behalf of students, families, and LAUSD could be more pronounced. Their expertise in building relationships with community, their longevity in the community, and their perspective as an external partner makes them an incredibly valuable asset to the selection, placement, training,

and support to both LAUSD and the transformative leaders themselves. There could be a role for this group either formally via an advisory to the superintendent or informally by offering training programs to top-level leaders.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on my experience with this study, I would make four recommendations for future studies. First, replicating this study in other urban school districts could determine whether similar themes are found with the participants elsewhere. I would recommend including school board members and organization board members in future studies, if possible. Given their responsibility to select and evaluate the top-level leaders and set policy for the organizations, their participation would enrich the existing data. Secondly, it would be interesting to conduct a comparison between the themes that emerged from this study (and future ones like this) and the characteristics that some of the major organizations have used to recruit, train, and place senior leaders in urban communities. Thirdly, earlier in this chapter, I explained that the interpretation differed between the professional community, the community being served by way of students and families, and the larger geographic community. Understanding how leaders conceptualize community and the role each version of community plays in their work could provide more insight on that particular theme.

Finally, one of the participants made the statement that he did not think Los Angeles had truly experienced transformative leadership in its purist sense. When asked to expand on the statement, the individual stated that none of the superintendents of Los Angeles Unified (he chose to focus on that singular position) came "from us." Exploring the question whether transformative leaders who are "from" the community are more effective at serving those

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communities than those who are not is an interesting idea and one that has implications for the way leaders are selected.

Conclusion

In a region like Los Angeles—where the second largest school district in the country is located and over a half-million students are served by it each year—ensuring stability in leadership and success for *all* students should be the goal for stakeholders across the city. Population demographics indicate an upward trend in the percentage of students of color that will be served by LAUSD; current enrollment is currently comprised of over 80% students of color Given the lack of significant progress toward academic preparedness for all students, but specifically for students of color who are also economically disadvantaged, we cannot afford to continue to lead as we have. This is lack of consistent leadership has reached, what I believe, a crisis point. The repercussions for not preparing hundreds of thousands of students for academic success each year are immense and far-reaching—strong communities cannot be built if the youth are not equipped to become the next generation of leaders.

The purpose of this study was to identify common characteristics, dispositions, and beliefs of transformative leaders who have served or who are currently serving within the Los Angeles educational landscape and to present those findings in a way that could inform current and future practices. The transformative leaders that participated in this study are clearly committed to providing the students of Los Angeles with the best educational options possible. They accepted the many challenges that came with their positions, led organizations to success, challenged the status quo, and made some of the toughest decisions of their careers—all the while keeping the needs of Los Angeles's diverse student body at the center. Some leaders were

placed in their positions deliberately—they were identified, groomed, and placed at their posts by other leaders or organizations. Others made it to their posts after a long series of unplanned events. Still others took the traditional route and were promoted over a long period of time to get where they were. If we treated filling these vital leadership positions as the business world does when selecting a new CEO, I suspect we would not experience the turnover we have in Los Angeles.

It is my hope that this study will add to the existing research on school leadership by focusing specifically on transformative senior-level leaders dedicated to serving students in urban districts. Ignoring the fact that we have failed this group of students is unjust and morally reprehensible. As a society that depends on an educated workforce to ensure a stable future, the United States will need to operate with intentionality when preparing for leadership succession at one of the largest school districts in the country and at organizations that partner with LAUSD.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part I: Background

1. Can you tell me about your upbringing? Where did you grow up? What was the community like? Urban, suburban, rural?

2. Were you the first to graduate from college? What was the message you received from your family about attending college?

3. Why did you choose to work in education? Where there specific influences that contributed to your decision?

4. How long have you been working in education?

Part II: Career History

1. Can you talk me through your career trajectory? What do you think contributed to your advancement?

2. What made you decide to work in education in Los Angeles? Was it a deliberate decision? Where there other school districts/cities you worked in?

3. Do you intend on continuing to work in Los Angeles?

Part III: Leadership for Multicultural Education: Based on Sonia Nieto's (1999) school reform anchors in multicultural education.

1. What do you think are the macro-level issues impacting school systems?

2. What are the micro-level issues? How do these affect the resources that impact the quality of education provided to students?

3. What is the role of school reform?

4. Do students come to school with talents and strengths that contribute to their academic success?

5. Are there basic beliefs you have about what students are capable of achieving?

Part IV: Transformative Leadership: Based on the frameworks for transformative leadership.

1. What type of relationships and environments do you aim to develop in the workplace? Who do you believe should be involved in decision-making?

2. What do you see your role to be in connection to internal and external structures? Do you believe it is your responsibility to be critical of those structures?

Part V: Leadership for Social Justice: Based on literature on leadership for social justice.

1. What is the role of social justice in your work?

2. What role do social, political, and cultural power structures play in education?

3. What role does race, class, and gender play in education? Is there a need to focus the work on marginalized populations?

4. Do you believe it is your obligation to articulate a narrative of hope for education?

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