A District's Journey of Transformative Leadership: Moving Beyond Open Access to the Improvement, Inclusion, and Success of Students of Color in Advanced Placement

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Abstract
Leadership is a critical component of creating and sustaining a school culture that promotes the inclusion and success of students. The purpose of this study was to examine how school leaders helped to enact and sustain a reformed Advanced Placement (AP) culture designed to increase participation and success of students of color. Building on existing work of transformative leadership, this study describes the experience and challenges of educational leaders in understanding how leadership practices change the AP culture. The case study method examined one mid-sized urban district in Southern California that utilized transformative leadership. The methods included 15 open-ended interviews with educational leaders in a variety of capacities (i.e., district leadership, school administrators, counselors, and teacher leaders). The findings demonstrated critical components leading to deep and meaningful cultural change in AP. The analysis showed leaders in this district, who sought equity, were driven to create meaningful change, and were grounded in the community. Being grounded in the community had a great impact in promoting a transformed culture at the classroom, site, and district level.

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The completion of Advanced Placement (AP) coursework plays a vital role in the college admissions process by giving students a competitive edge through increased weighted grade point averages, experience in college-level thinking, and by demonstrating the desire to challenge themselves academically. Access to AP coursework can therefore, mean the difference between being admitted or rejected (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Furthermore, students who participate in advanced programs are also more likely to stay in college and complete a four-year degree (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Kyburg et al., 2007). Students that obtain a passing score on the AP exam are eligible to earn college credit.

Students of color in AP have historically faced a plethora of challenges, from the inequity of access to advanced programs, lack of support, and adapting to a traditional AP classroom culture (Cohen & Garcia, 2010; Kettler & Hurst, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Educators have made a stride forward in increasing the number of underrepresented students taking AP courses. Open Access has opened the doors of opportunity for underrepresented students. However, AP exam success remains in question, as passing scores have remained relatively stagnant over the last decade (College Board, 2013; Klopfenstein, 2004; McCormick, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to examine how educational leaders utilize transformative leadership practices to enact and sustain systemic change in the advanced placement program to provide much-needed support for students of color. The research question driving this study is:

How do secondary school leaders, specifically AP teachers, counselors, site and district administrators, use transformative leadership practices to promote inclusion and success of students of color in AP?

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Leadership

Research indicates how various leadership practices impact academic achievement and academic instruction (Crum et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008; Styron & Lemire, 2009). Leithwood et al. (2008), for example, found common leadership practices among effective school leaders that have been successful at improving student test scores at their schools. Likewise, other studies discuss other leadership practices, which are frequently mentioned in successful school leaders who effectively support their staff (Crum et al., 2010). These leadership practices include providing clear directions and expectations, the continued development of instructional and support
staff, restructuring the educational institution, and the involvement of school leaders in supporting and managing instructional programs (Crum et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Although these practices do make effective leaders, their managerial nature and focus on improving current practices are not enough to bring about systemic change. There is more to leadership than just being effective; leadership is also about bringing meaningful change in culture, beliefs and social justice and it takes a transformative leader to do that (Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2008). This study uses the lens of transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010) as the main theoretical framework with embedded concepts from the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership model (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) to examine how educational leaders create and sustain a reformed AP culture that promotes inclusion and success of students of color in AP.

Shields (2010) discusses eight concepts of transformational leadership: personal background, balancing critique and promise, effecting deep and equitable change, creating new knowledge frameworks, acknowledging power and privilege, emphasizing private and public good, focus on liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity and justice. She argues that social justice and democracy are at the heart of transformative leadership as it critiques “inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but a better life lived in common with others” (Shields, 2010, p. 559). Shields believes that educational leadership is embedded within broader social contexts and therefore transformative leadership is inextricably related to promoting inclusion and socially just learning environments. Furthermore, Shields (2010) connects transformative leadership theory to the work of educational leaders by demonstrating how practice offers inclusion, equity and a democratic concept of education.

In order to achieve success in AP in both inclusion and exam scores, the role of educational leadership is crucial. Leadership has been shown to have an impact on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010). It is also important to acknowledge that the definition of educational leader has changed over the years to include more than just administrators. It is not just the responsibility of the principal to be a school leader but for all staff, in particular teachers and counselors, to take an adaptive role to foster the success of students (Habegger, 2008). This study will examine leadership broadly to include all of these groups.

Methodology

Yin (2017) states that a case study design is intended for questions that seek to explain why and how a social phenomenon works. According to Yin (2017) a case study design is best suited for studies in which the research questions require an extensive and in-depth description of the social phenomenon of interest. Moreover, Yin (2017) explains that a qualitative case study methodology can be used in studies that are
explanatory, exploratory or descriptive in nature. This study sought to explore the case of SoCal Unified School District (SUSD) to gain a better understanding of the experiences of educational leaders (at the classroom, school, and district levels) in promoting inclusion of students of color in AP and fostering a culture that allows for student success. For this reason, a qualitative case study design was best suited to analyze, interpret, explore, and explain the experiences of educational leaders in implementing a flourishing Open Access AP program.

Setting

The pseudonym SoCal Unified School District (SUSD) was used to identify a midsized school district located in Los Angeles County. SUSD was chosen as the site of interest as it was one of three districts to be named 2017 National AP District of the year. The district received this recognition at the midsize district level. According to the district website, SUSD serves approximately 15,000 students and consists of 12 elementary schools, three middle schools, three high schools, one pre-school, and one adult and independent study school. Two comprehensive high schools were examined in this study: Shang Ri-La High School and Metropolis High School. These two sites were chosen for the following reasons: (a) both sites are comparable with district demographics, (b) both sites are relatively similar in performance, graduation, demographic, and staffing statistics, and student support service ratios (c) both sites have adopted and implemented the districts Equity and Access Policy, and (d) both sites offer the same number of AP classes (14). Shang Ri-La and Metropolis High School are the only two comprehensive high schools that offer AP in the district. Table 1 describes the demographics of the schools.

Participants

To obtain a diverse perspective in responses, it was vital to gather views from various school leaders. This study therefore included a mix of educational leaders, which include four district administrators, four site administrators, three counselors, three AP teachers, and one AP Coordinator. The AP coordinator serves as a liaison between the administration and the AP teachers. The coordinator is knowledgeable of the AP exams but does not teach an AP class. Since there is an AP administrator, the primary role of the AP coordinator is teacher support and logistics. As such the coordinator will be referred to as an AP teacher for reference purposes.
### Table 1. High School Demographics.

| High School   | Number of students | Latino (%) | Black (%) | White (%)  | Asian (%) | Pacific Islander (%) | Multiracial (%) | SES Disadvantaged (%) |
|---------------|--------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Shang Ri-La   | 2,250              | 91.7       | 7.4       | 0.5        | 0.1       | 0.1                  | 0.2              | 17.9                   |
| Metropolis    | 1,770              | 92.9       | 6.1       | 0.7        | 0.2       | 0.2                  | 0.2              | 14.2                   |
A total of 15 participants were interviewed in this study: eight males and seven females. Participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling. All participants were selected due to their participation in the implementation of the district's revised AP program. The district superintendent served as a gatekeeper and referred the administrators. All administrators who were invited to participate accepted the invitation. Additionally, the site administrators referred counselors and AP teachers who were directly involved at the implementation of AP open access. After receiving the participant referral list, five counselors and seven teachers were invited to participate. Two counselors declined participation and four AP teachers failed to respond.

Table 2 illustrates that participants represent various positions in the district, length of employment, ethnicity, and gender. Participants in this study were employed at SUSD and had been with the district for a minimum of five years. All participants were also working for the district for at least four years during the development and implementation of the district’s equity and access policy between 2010–2011 and 2016–2017 school years.

| Pseudonym | Ethnicity       | Gender | Position         | District Years |
|-----------|-----------------|--------|------------------|----------------|
| Miles     | Latino          | Male   | AP Teacher       | 6              |
| Susan     | Middle Eastern  | Female | AP Teacher       | *<16           |
| Jesse     | Latina          | Female | AP Teacher       | 23             |
| Oliver    | Asian           | Male   | AP Teacher       | 8              |
| Dinah     | Latina          | Female | Counselor        | 8              |
| Helena    | Latina          | Female | Counselor        | 10             |
| Barry     | Indian American | Male   | Counselor        | 13             |
| Diana     | Caucasian       | Female | Site Administrator | 32           |
| Colleen   | Filipina        | Female | Site Administrator | 10           |
| Warren    | Pacific Islander| Male   | Site Administrator | 15           |
| Kendra    | Latina          | Female | Site Administrator | 20           |
| Bruce     | Chicano         | Male   | District Administrator | 8       |
| Billy     | Asian           | Male   | District Administrator | 18     |
| Jaime     | Chicano         | Male   | District Administrator | 27     |
| J’onn     | Latino          | Male   | District Administrator | 14     |

Note. *Participant’s response indicated more than 16 years.
Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data were gathered through individual interviews that were audio recorded. They lasted at least an hour and were transcribed through a professional transcription service. Each participant gave written consent to take part in the research.

An interview protocol with four variations, one for each educational leader, was used to facilitate the participants’ story in regarding their experience in the implementation of the district’s equity and access policy in AP, and to describe their perceptions on leadership practices and support provided. Open-ended questions were used to allow for participant’s narrative to be expressed (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The protocol was developed from concepts of Shields’s (2010) Transformative Leadership theory and themes from Kouzes and Posner (2012) Leadership Inventory. The protocols were designed to elicit specific responses focused on three areas: experience and perceptions of equity and open access in AP (Davis et al., 2013; Flores & Gomez, 2011; Graham, 2016), support and resources for AP success (Roegman & Hatch, 2016; Sharer, 2015), and perceptions and practice of leadership (Balyer et al., 2017; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Perry, 2013; Shields, 2010). The protocols were designed to address the experience of each educational leader in respect to their current role, that is, the AP teacher, counselor or administrator. All protocol questions were guided by literature that pertain to transformative leadership practices, perception of Open Access, and barriers faced by students of color in AP.

Four pre-interview questions were developed to obtain demographic information and serve as an introduction to the study. One of the questions asked for participants to share what led them to elect a career in education. The experiences school leaders shared, told a narrative that tied their experiences to their current philosophy of education and leadership. As a result, the interview protocol was modified to include the pre-interview questions as part of the main interview questions to further explore the influence of personal experiences in education. Pilot interviews were conducted to inform revisions on protocols.

Data Analysis

Provisional codes were developed but not used in this study in order to conceptualize ideas of transformative leadership. New codes were derived upon the review of data to draw on patterns and meaning that emerged during open coding (Saldaña, 2015). Axial coding was then used to identify a relationship among codes and remove any redundant codes for the best representation of data (Saldaña, 2015). For example, the axial code of collaborating toward a shared vision emerged from two open codes creating a shared vision through data and looking for opportunities to share the vision. Lastly, selective coding allowed for core categories to be derived from the data after axial coding was conducted (Saldaña, 2015). During the coding process, selective coding was vital in the development of The Community Impetus Model (CIM) which
will be later discussed, as it addressed the how and why questions that explained the transformative change which occurred at SoCal Unified (Saldaña, 2015).

After developing an open code collaborating toward a shared vision, for example, the selective code justification and retrospection of the vision was created. Ultimately central themes were derived through selective coding, which were used in the development of conceptualized theory. Triangulation was used as a method to validate data collection (Glesne, 2016). Data were cross-verified between secondary documents, observations, and interviews to further explore the themes regarding the inclusion and success of students of color in AP. Additionally, a codebook was used to organize and gather all coding data and to create potential categories and develop first cycle themes. During data analyses, the process of code weaving was used after second-cycle coding to integrate codes into a narrative form to investigate how these codes were related to suggested broader emergent themes (Saldaña, 2015).

**Findings**

Looking at the AP test data in Table 3, the first row displays the exam passing rates from the 2009–2010 school year, the year before open access implementation. That was the last year SUSD officially practiced restricted or limited access to AP. A total of 14 of the 15 participants in the study described the restrictive practices that were in place to select students for AP at that time. Participants described the AP selection process before the district’s equity and access policy as “catering to the 10% of the student population,” having “a lot of prerequisites to get into the classes,” and “just for the very elite students.” These descriptors illustrate a traditional AP culture that has historically promoted restrictive practices, which serve as barriers to students of color to not only rigorous coursework but also access to higher education. One district leader elaborated, ”Whenever you had an AP class, it was just one class of a small group of students. It was just emphasis on one group of students going to college.”

The AP data provided in Table 3 show that the results during the restrictive practices did not yield phenomenal results when compared to passing rates after open access was implemented. The 303 hand-selected students that participated in AP produced 134 (20%) passing scores of three or better. During the first year of open access, participation increased by 40% from 303 (selected) to 424 (open enrollment) and resulted in 169 (18.7%) passing scores, almost maintaining the same percentage regardless of the level of preparedness or background knowledge as argued by some teachers and parents. Table 4 shows a difference in exam success as Metropolis High School initiated their AP program with open access policy. Although their scores have dropped since their first year, the total number of students taking the exam have more than tripled.

The AP exam data from 2013–2016 provided in Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate progress made through increased supports and leadership practices. In 2017 SUSD was recognized as National AP district of the year at the mid-sized level.
District and site administrators, as well as teachers and counselors, described the conversations and changes that created such an impact on student success. The communications between staff and parents repeated the conviction that “a zip code does not have to determine your future,” and sent the message that “all of us are responsible toward improving the outcomes for all students of color.” One district leader noted, “We’re basically telling the world, LA, California, the nation, kids of color, like any other kids, can do the work, and have success.”

**Transformative Leadership at the School Site**

The improvement of AP scores was based on a commitment to equity based on several principles exemplified in the leadership of teachers, counselors, and administrators. They promoted a shift in mindset; the participants were driven to create change because they had lived the experience of inequity; they shared ownership through validation of the work of others, and they were grounded in community.
Promoting a shift in mindset. Prior to the implementation of reforms, the school district had a traditional approach to AP classes. In order to move away from a traditional AP culture in which AP was viewed as the purview of elite students (and teachers) to one of greater access and support, participants discussed the journey of moving from a fixed mindset in which students’ ability is viewed as missing or fundamentally lacking to that of a growth mindset, where students’ ability is viewed as being able to grow (Dweck, 2007). Deconstructing previous frameworks that maintain inequality such as the perception of ability such as they cannot do it, to the creation of new knowledge frameworks that encourage inclusion such as they can develop are elements of being a transformative leader (Shields, 2010). Participants discussed how a shift in mindset empowered not only staff but also students to help them overcome their doubts of which students should be part of an AP program. Warren, a site administrator, shared:

For my students, I want them to test themselves, and to go beyond what they think that they’re capable of…For the teachers, I think it raises their standards when they see, “Oh, these students can do this”…I always feel that success builds success.

Here, Warren indicates attempts to encourage both staff and students to challenge their deficit thinking and construct new frameworks of ability.

Other educational leaders explained encouraging a shift in mindset by helping staff to change the way they view success. One site administrator said, “I told teachers that if one of our students, who they think shouldn’t be in AP class… if they get a two, that’s a huge victory.” Promoting a shift in mindset allowed for continuous improvement and increased equity in AP: “The staff has embraced the growth mindset. Once inspired, they believe that students can learn, and they believe that students can correct and make improvements.” Site and district administrators also discussed how critical it was to promote a shift in mindset to provide equity in AP programs. This shift came from the leadership team helping teachers move their attention from generating passing scores to encouraging equity. One administrator explained, “What we told people is, ‘Don’t worry about your passing rate. If we’re truly serious about providing all of our students with the most rigorous opportunities…we need to focus on access to take these courses.’”

Counselors also discussed promoting a shift in mindset. Two out of three counselors described working on student perception and believing in their ability to be successful. One counselor explained, “I guess it comes down to helping educators shape that belief. It’s helping them understand that any student can succeed in these classes [AP].” A shift in mindset was also pivotal in fostering the success of students and highlighting accomplishments for parents and the community. Educational leaders achieved this change by also shifting the mindset of parents and the community. Dinah, a counselor explained, “It was educating the community. Showcasing the success that has come out of the schools…Parent communication, communicating this with them in their language is key. So to me, it’s about a shift in mindset.”
Driven to create meaningful change. Transformative leaders demonstrate moral courage and activism; they not only engage in conversations of social justice but display a willingness to actively participate in addressing the challenge of creating educational systems that are more equitable and inclusive in practice (Shields, 2010). Participants provided an expressive and detailed description of personal factors, which has motivated them to pursue transformative change. Additionally, participants also shared practices that other educational leaders have done that ignited a spark within them that actively make change happen. The practices shared during the interviews led to the development of two motivating factors, which will be discussed as subthemes: (a) Lived experience of inequity and (b) ownership through validation. All participants provided accounts that bring insight as to the development of transformative leadership practices that are inclusive, equitable and provide academic excellence.

Lived experience of inequity. Making change happen is no easy task, even with a firm conviction, it may still not be achieved. Some participants recalled former district leaders being mostly male and Caucasian, and they did not have an understanding of the struggles that the students and community faced. On the other hand, nearly all participants described having faced instances of inequity firsthand. Some described former leaders as unaware or not able to relate to what our kids go through. A counselor elaborated, “We didn’t have a person at the top that had been around long enough to get a good pulse of what was going on in this neighborhood to make anything change.” Data from the interviews describe the notion that the former district leaders did not live or witness any struggles, and this caused them to be removed from the community and the students they served.

Today, however, the educational leaders throughout the district are as diverse as the student population, with 14 out of 15 of the participants in the study identifying as persons of color: 10 Identified as Latino/a/Chicano/a, three as Asian American, one as American Indian, and one as Caucasian. Several participants shared experiences that have motivated them to be active agents of change to ensure that other students do not experience the adversity they experienced or witnessed. These lived experiences were described passionately and with conviction. Participants provided the most heartfelt and genuine statements that highlight the reason they embarked on an arduous undertaking to bring about transformative change.

Bruce, for example, shared a moving background story that paved the way to the field of education and his desire to create equitable change in educational practice as a district leader. Bruce expanded:

I started school without knowing English. I didn’t like school. I didn’t feel like it related to me. I didn’t understand it. I was alone at a table by myself, working with usually an instructional assistant, or I was coloring all day. I was not included in what was going on because of the language.

Bruce described feeling left out, not having support and not relating to anyone during his first educational years. Bruce experienced the very same inequitable
practices that have hindered the success of students of color for generations (Cohen, & Garcia, 2010; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Additionally, Bruce described gatekeeping practices that served as barriers to AP access during his high school years. He described a conversation with a school counselor, “I was in the lowest math class available at the high school…I wanted to be in Algebra, but he told me, ‘Well, you took a placement test. The results from the placement test say that you have to be in this class.’” In spite of what the educational practitioners believed at the time, Bruce like many other participants who experienced inequity strived for access to a greater education. By doing so, Bruce was able to receive an acceptance letter from UC Riverside and UC Berkeley.

Other educational leaders also shared similar stories that demonstrate how their lived experience of inequity served as a driving force behind their need for transformative change. Colleen, a site administrator, began by talking about Bruce’s experiences in education and then opened up to her own. She said:

If you listen to Bruce’s biography, then you can understand why he’s such a strong advocate for students of color, like his own personal challenges in education… I guess in a way me too because of my own personal challenges as an immigrant, as somebody who’s female, a woman of color… .

**Ownership and validation: Site leaders, counselors, and teachers.** In this case study encouraging the heart and enabling others to act (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) were evident in transformative leaders who engaged in practices, which created ownership and validation of staff, parents and students. In this study ownership and validation are not individual components. On the contrary, participants described the process of building ownership through validation. Similar to lived experiences of inequity, participants expressed ownership through validation in terms of duty or responsibility to the students and the field of education. The descriptions given by participants help to clarify how they felt and currently feel about the mission and vision of the district. It is not just the district trying to achieve change, but the active role of everyone that comes into contact with students. Participants also discussed how trust in their ability and knowledge is communicated to them and how that validates their worth as contributing team members. Also, participants described a reformed AP culture that was achieved by promoting student ownership and validation. For instance, participants communicated ownership in terms such as having a moral obligation, duty to the field or responsibility to ensure that students have access to and succeed in education. One district leader explained:

For me it’s education is liberation and we have a moral obligation to ensure that especially students that are often marginalized or who come from a socially economically disadvantaged background and students of color under certain students, have the opportunity to have a chance at a better quality of life.
The term *moral obligation* implies that educators not only need to but must take ownership of ensuring that students are *liberated* through access to education. Moreover, this belief was not only expressed by a single individual, but nearly all participants vividly described the educational leaders at SUSD as just not talking about creating equity for all students, but living, breathing, and believing in taking ownership to create it. One site administrator shared, “we believe ‘education is freedom’ that’s what we try to get into our kids head. That’s how we communicate the trust in their ability.” Several participants also echoed the message of validating student ability and promoting ownership to create a reformed culture. They shared their belief of opening AP to all students and explained that it is up to educators to communicate a belief in students’ ability to be successful in AP regardless of their current level. One district administrator stated, “It’s opening it up to all students, believing in them...so that they can experience that rigor in their high school life. So really taking that ownership and that personal support for students in this community.”

For Jesse, an AP teacher, it meant going the extra mile:

“They’re not at the level because they weren’t being exposed to rigor. Regardless, we are going to tell them we trust they can get there, but we need to help them get there too. I guess for the same reason we go an extra mile to try to fulfill those needs.

Validation and ownership are complementary in nature. Participants described taking ownership in terms of the mission, the success of students, and the community. They describe ownership through validation as communicating trust and ensuring that students are aware that adults do believe in their ability to succeed. One district administrator added, “Trust is another means of inspiring a student, of letting them know that, hey, we believe in you, we have high dreams and expectations of you.” Ownership through Validation was also communicated as the responsibility of each person that works in a school by taking an active role so real and meaningful change can happen. Dinah, a counselor, articulated:

“It’s just a vision, it’s a responsibility to the field, the students, the community. We, I do mean all of us, have to roll up our sleeves, be vulnerable, make mistakes. We need to do whatever is possible to make students feel comfortable in preparing to be successful.

Transformative leadership also entails building alliances to work toward a collective promise.

**Grounded in Community: Transformative Leadership Praxis**

Being grounded in the community was the central theme that participants discussed as being the initial catalyst for change and a key component of transformative leadership. Participants expressed a personal investment in the community by being alumni,
having ties to the surrounding communities or embracing the culture of the community. Although not all participants revealed a personal connection to the community, they all discussed a deep, meaningful connection to the community as critical to promoting the success of students and the growth of the community. As a central theme, being grounded in the community helps to connect all the elements that give meaning to how and why the individuals of this district were able to successfully implement systemic change that not only addressed access to AP but also increased equity of resources leading to the success of students of color both in the classroom and on the AP exam.

Approximately two-thirds of participants discussed being personally vested in the community since they were once the very students that walked the halls of Shang Ri-La High School. Several participants shared feeling a personal calling to the district and a desire to make a difference. A counselor shared, “I grew up here. I’m giving back, making a difference, small but it’s a start,” an AP teacher stated, “My own experience here at SoCal Unified led me back here. As an alum, I wanted to make changes in this community,” and a site administrator added, “I wanted to come back and be able to guide students to pursue higher education.” One counselor explained that for her, creating equitable change was a personal mission, “I am a local gal, I wanted to contribute, go back to where it all started… my hometown. So, what we’re doing here it’s personal for me. It’s my community.” The grassroots expressed by district and site administration as well as counseling staff influenced these alumni to not only give back to their community but also sparked a desire in them to bring about deep, meaningful change. Helena, a counselor, recalled “I knew my heart was at Shang Ri-La High School because I’m an alum…I know my community, I’m here, I’m happy, and I am here to make a difference.” District alumni not only shared a personal investment but an understanding of how the community functions, creating great solidarity among other educational leaders.

Being an alumnus from the district, however, was not the only thing that was shared which expressed being grounded in the community. Other participants discussed their deep understanding and immersion in the community. Some shared similar experiences growing up just a few miles away, and others took the community as their own and embraced everything it had to offer. Some participants shared that the key, fundamental reason for making transformative change in AP a reality for all students was their connection to the community: “I grew up near here. So, for me that means something, I really want to provide that opportunity [open access] for students.”

Growing up near the community, or being an alum are not the only ways educational leaders were grounded in the community. Diana, a site administrator, discussed growing up in Pittsburgh and having a different experience coming to Metropolis. It was not her educational experience that grounded her the community but her immersion in it. She explained that her adopted [host] family when she moved from Pittsburgh was Mexican and gave her a sense of belonging. She identifies as “Ger-Mexican,” she states, “I feel like I’m half German, half Mexican. But in reality, I’m Caucasian.” She explained that having a personal connection to the community in the manner she does, has allowed her to connect to students she added, “I know it sounds weird coming from me, but kids need to be able to see themselves in who they seek help from, that’s
how I relate.” Lastly, educational leaders described elements of being grounded in the community as having a renewed awareness of the mission they set for themselves as educators. One district leader recalled:

Being part of this community made me again reflect and remind myself, why did I go into education, to begin with? I went into education to try to make an impact, to try to make a difference, to support families that maybe haven’t had these opportunities, so that’s why I am here, that’s why I stayed.

Discussion

Transforming the traditional AP culture, while simultaneously increasing AP participation and exam scores for students of color, is highlighted by the journey of SUSD educational leaders in becoming transformative leaders in practice. Their journey is best understood by examining the transformative characteristics these educational leaders demonstrated. The characteristics helped to develop a praxis by expanding on three central constructs that explain how transformative leaders understand a need for change, move toward transformation, and build on their community grassroots.

The Community Impetus Model: Transformative Leadership Paradigm

The CIM is a multidimensional model based on the findings that help illustrate how leadership practices become transformative in nature when leaders are grounded in the community, driven to make meaningful change, and actively seek equity. Findings regarding the role of the district distinctly pertained to creating synergy and being dedicated to improvement. Additionally, the themes found in this case study further support the findings in previous research regarding the importance of school culture, funding and resources, trust, forming relationships, and ownership when creating systemic change (D’Entremont, 2016; Gonzalez, 2016; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2017).

Central, is the idea that equity concerns are not considered in the abstract but rather begin with deep connections and history within the community. Many of the leaders have experienced inequities in local educational settings themselves that they now seek to remedy. These experiences serve as a driving factor for meaningful change. Ultimately educational leaders who were most active to seek equity expressed deep connections with the community and have experienced inequity. These leaders expressed not only a desire to create change but described the actions they have taken in order to make the change meaningful, and a reality. Additionally, it appeared that the district played a critical role in developing transformative change by developing synergy and being committed to improvement.
The motivating factors that cause educational leaders to seek meaningful change were pivotal in understanding how transformative practices are developed and utilized at SUSD. This component was applied to the development of the CIM. Figure 1 illustrates how the CIM embodies ideas of Five Practices of Transformational Leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012) and Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2010). Educational leaders can initiate transformative change in their communities through the use of the CIM.

**Implications for Theory and Practice**

When comparing this study’s findings with Kouzes and Posner’s model, both similarities and differences exist. In this study, leadership practices that were closely linked to the five exemplary leadership practices include: (a) shifting mindset, (b) ownership through validation, and (c) justification and retrospection of the vision. Although the results of this study did align with Kouzes and Posner’s (2012) model, they are however not entirely consistent with the model; there is some degree of variation. For example, encouraging the heart was demonstrated in this study as validation and enabling others to act as ownership. These two practices, however, were not described as being distinct; the results indicated that leaders create ownership through validation. More specifically by encouraging the heart, leaders enable others to act.

Additionally, inspiring a shared vision was expanded by providing two components: (a) justification through conversations and data and (b) retrospection to revisit and
continue the vision alive. Lastly, this study boldly adds two specific practices to Kouzes and Posner’s model to guide district-level leadership. These two practices include: (a) financial backing and (b) building synergy. Since the purpose of this study was also to provide a guide for district-level leadership, these two practices provided an added awareness as to key practices steered by district leaders.

The CIM developed in this study incorporates all eight of Shield’s (2010) transformative leadership elements as three motivational constructs: (a) seeking equity, (b) driven to create meaningful change, and (c) grounded in community. Seeking equity contained elements of balancing critique and promise, acknowledging power and privilege, and deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks. First educational leaders had to recognize a need for change through critique and promise. Second, using their current positions of power and privilege leaders were able to enact policy changes that encouraged increased participation of students of color in AP. Lastly, changes in practice included promoting a shift in mindset through the deconstruction and reconstruction of current knowledge frameworks of both staff and students. These elements are incorporated in the “seeking equity” construct in the outer layer of the CIM.

Shields’s (2010) concepts of personal background and emphasizing moral courage and activism are best linked to “driven to create meaningful change.” This motivational construct explains how educational leaders give meaning to their actions and ideas. Understanding the meaning of practice is a fundamental component of achieving transformative change. Shields suggests that personal background may provide awareness as to what makes educational leaders dedicated to seeking deep and meaningful change. The second construct of the CIM provides the acumen of the motivation of educational leaders to become transformative in practice. Lastly, the core construct of the CIM, being grounded in the community was explained as taking on the mission to improve not only the success of students but that of the community as a personal mission. This construct includes the elements of Shields’s concepts of private and public good and a focus on liberation, equity, and democracy.

**Implications for Practice: Transformative Leadership in Schools, District, and Community**

Educational leaders work in collaboration with various stakeholders and incorporate different ideas but ultimately decide as to how the district and the school will proceed. Transformative leaders, however, build synergy by inspiring other to not only adopt but also believe in the mission of the institution through validation and ownership (Balyer et al., 2017; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Synergy at SUSD was established by focusing on bringing on alumni and other like-minded individuals and through justification and retrospection of the vision. Seven out of 15 participants identified as alumni of the district and five as having a being raised in surrounding communities.
Three out of the four district administrators were alumni or were raised in the surrounded communities. This commonality has promoted the development of synergy in the district. Having experienced or witnessed many of the inequities current students have faced.

The district has also promoted synergy in relationships through staffing. Moreover, aides, tutors and other support staff were identified as being former students. The district was making a conscious attempt to not only promote community in the schools through hiring alumni but also to have the school sites grow along with the community by working to incorporate members of the community in the building a transformed district culture. Additionally, the district conducted several community meetings that served to justify the vision of the district. For SUSD, providing clear statistical as well as anecdotal data proved to be vital in developing buy-in for parents and other stakeholders. The data justified the need to make various changes to educational practice that was impeding student access and success in AP. has motivated educational leaders at SUSD to seek transformative change.

Educational leaders who express ideas of transformative change not only verbalize their beliefs but also show authenticity by displaying their values as words, actions, and choices (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). It is the willingness to “take risks and to become actively engaged in the struggle and challenge of creating schools that are more equitable” that makes leadership transformative (Shields, 2010, p. 580). District leadership does not only verbally express commitment to the AP mission but demonstrates such commitment through actions. In this case study, district commitment to improvement was shown by providing 100% of the financial backing of AP in both schools. This means that anything pertaining to AP is district funded. Having sufficient financial backing allows for schools to provide academic preparation that leads to an increase in participation and success of students of color in AP (Griffin & Dixon, 2017). For example, district leaders at SUSD described the allocation of funds for Saturday tutoring. The funding allowed for approximately five weeks of AP tutoring on Saturdays. The increased funding permitted individual sites to offer an additional 4–5 weeks of Saturday AP tutoring that resulted in over two months of additional exam preparation. During this time the district experienced an increase of almost 40% AP passing scores.

Lastly, commitment to improvement is demonstrated by the readiness to take risks. Both Shields (2010) and Kouzes and Posner (2012) discuss taking risks in innovation and failure. Failure allows for growth and improvement by setting the stage for the development of additional innovative, transformative practices or ideas. The purpose of this case study is expressed as a guide for districts to implement transformative change in AP to promote the inclusion and success of students of color. SUSD is a pioneer in this respect, as it did not have a model to follow and attempted each practice by faith. The courage of district leaders to engage in untested practices proved to be groundbreaking in creating a total shift in culture. Several participants expressed the district’s disposition to implement innovative ideas. Had the disposition of the district wavered in fear or failure, the practices that hindered equity and success of students of color would have persisted.
Open access has removed several gatekeeping practices that serve as barriers to the access of AP for students of color (Roegman & Hatch, 2016). As much of a success as this is, it is not enough to promote the inclusion and success of students of color (Ashmead & Blanchett, 2013; Griffin & Dixon, 2017; Superville, 2016). Today, although many districts have implemented an open access policy to AP, inclusion, and success of students of color remain at the forefront of improvement (Kettler & Hurst, 2017). This issue may be attributed to the fact that open access is addressing exactly that, opening access to AP, but it does not address the cultivation of an inclusive culture which fosters success. Through the CIM, the creation of such a culture can be achieved. Thus, the recommendations for districts to practice include: (a) the implementation of interview questions based on the CIM to determine the candidate’s connection with the community and espousal of equity values, (b) developing celebratory events to highlight individual staff and their hard work regarding AP improvement, (c) creating and maintaining a collaborative vision through strategic planning and retrospection, and (d) being mindful of financial commitment to the success of the vision.

Conclusion

This case study’s conclusion that transformative leadership practices are essential in building a culture of inclusion and success concurs with previous literature that suggests that transformative leaders find ways to address cultural and societal inequities and inequalities that persist between dominant and marginalized populations (A. W. Astin & Astin, 2000; Kose, 2007; Santamaria, 2014; Shields, 2010). The literature also argues that transformative leaders create meaningful change in schools by taking risks and willingly meeting the challenges of creating such change (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Shields, 2010). Moreover, transformative leadership is built in the elements of social justice, equity and quality of life (Brown, 2004; Shields, 2010). Educational leaders at SUSD have become transformative in practice by looking to correct the inequities of traditional methods that encumber student success. The participants in this study were grounded in the community. They lived in or near the community, or they developed a personal connection to it. They demonstrated a fervor to make meaningful change happen. The drive was even more apparent within the educational leaders who recognized or had experienced inequity, especially in a school setting. These experiences led them to seek equity actively, and meaningful reform to promote student success. Moreover, these transformative leaders recognized inequities and addressed them with new innovative ideas and willingness to learn from failure. This transformative change was only accomplished with adequate support. The district played a vital role in the support that educational leaders received by creating a culture of synergy, and showing dedication to improvement by providing funding, innovation, and preparedness to accept failure. Ultimately, the AP culture that was created through transformative leadership promoted an increased inclusion of students of color by shifting mindsets to understand that a zip code does not determine success.
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