

**EMBRACING ASSET-BASED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DISPOSITIONS IN
ADVANCING TRUE EQUITY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR STUDENTS
LIVING IN POVERTY**

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ABSTRACT

The dispositions of school leaders play an integral role in dismantling inequities that hinder the academic achievement of students, particularly students living in poverty. Recent studies bring to light the importance of an asset-based understanding of what children bring to the classroom and how to draw on these assets in creating opportunities for student success. A paradigm shift is taking place whereby school leaders must lead with equity as a foundational thought when assisting teachers in recognizing, valuing, and honoring the assets that students bring to the classroom. This paper attempts to discuss critical issues pertaining to educational equity by using related literature on the topics of poverty and transformative leadership as well as data collected from 15 participants consisting of administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students who were interviewed in the study employing qualitative narrative inquiry. Additionally, it makes recommendations relative to the dispositions school leaders must employ, embrace, foster, and practice in addressing the social, cultural, and emotional needs of students to elicit and enhance effective engagement in school.

Keywords: asset-based dispositions, equity, social capital, cultural capital, transformative leadership, culture of poverty

Introduction

According to educational and social science research, poverty based on income inequality is a strong influencing factor that creates obstacles for public school students in regard to their social, emotional, and academic development and success and the quality of living conditions (Bomer et al., 2008; Akom, 2011; Almy & Tooley, 2012; Berliner, 2013; Johnson et al., 2018;). According to Wise (2019), if the educational system can pay attention to the needs of children living in poverty and children of color, the barriers may be lifted and success for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or family income, may be guaranteed. Attending to the needs of children from low-income families may be achieved by professionalizing teaching and, by implication, developing school leaders who must make sure that effective skillful teachers are accessible to these traditionally marginalized students. However, it will take perseverance and brave work to work with marginalized students and also to be courageous to incentivize teachers to work in marginalized communities, challenge the inequitable status quo (Brown, 2018) and support the courageous conversations from awareness to a deeper understanding of school leaders' leadership disposition in dealing with students.

According to Ullucci and Howard (2015), children living in poverty, who are located in low-income neighborhoods, experience disproportionate levels of high crime, gang violence, drug influence, death, and health issues. In addition, a recent report indicates that poverty plays a huge role in perpetuating the achievement gap in math and English between students from low-income families and those not from low-income families as measured by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) (Flint, 2018). More than ever, this achievement gap, which reflects an opportunity gap or a gap in social class highlighted in the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 pandemic (Cummins, 2020; Sellery, 2020), needs to be mitigated through the efforts of school leaders who possess caring and transformative leadership dispositions.

Rawlinson (2011) states that, "many students in poverty have spotty-to-poor academic records that can often be linked to the poverty mindset that strips students of ambition and enthusiasm and makes them indifferent" (p. xiii). Poverty mindset is a viewpoint that students living in poverty can develop within themselves and is defined as an insidious way poverty can negatively impact the shaping of a child's mind and can be made perceptible by undesirable behaviors displayed in the classroom. Students who have a poverty mindset, according to Rawlinson (2011), can experience feelings of powerlessness, lack control over their lives, and internalize failure as a lack of ability, rather than skill, which can lead to feelings of hopelessness for a successful future. Although not all students from low-income neighborhoods may develop this mindset, it is important to acknowledge that, "the poverty mindset is one of the most difficult and pervasive challenges to overcome" (Rawlinson, 2011, p. xv) due to its deficit-based thinking, beliefs, and attitudes (Anyon, 2012). Inevitably, hopelessness is made visible in students living in poverty through the manifestations of high dropout rates, low student achievement, illegal drug use, high teenage pregnancy rates, and high rates of imprisonment (Blankstein, Noguera, & Kelly, 2016; Berliner, 2013). While the barriers to student achievement and quality of life, the prevalence of violence and drug use, and the perennial poor performance of students living in poverty are challenging issues, they can be addressed by school leaders who are sensitive to their social and cultural needs and the daily realities of the communities that they live in (Berliner, 2006, 2013; Rawlinson, 2011; Ullucci & Howard, 2015).

Many leaders and reform efforts over the past 50 years have attempted to assist in ending the “War on Poverty” through various education movements and policies such as Title I, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), A Nation at Risk Report (1983), No Excuses (1999), NCLB (2001), and ESSA (2015). These educational reforms have all made similar surmountable claims that students living in poverty can achieve at high levels through increased accountability without taking into consideration the institutional inequities that exist and the lack of awareness and attention paid to their social, cultural, emotional, and historical barriers. Many other attempts at the local (city/school) level have also been unsuccessful in increasing and sustaining the educational achievement of students attending schools in low-income communities (Anyon, 2005; Blankstein et al., 2016). The paradox lies in the reality that these accountability movements inevitably prevent and decrease creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication needed to increase academic achievement in all content areas (Csuvarszki, 2016). In addition, research demonstrates that the prevailing and pervasive out-of-school factors, macroeconomic systemic inequities, and the disposition of educational leaders continually negate and supersede any and all educational policy and reform efforts (Anyon, 2005; Berliner, 2013; Kozol, 2005).

This research paper attempts to discuss critical issues pertaining to educational equity by using related literature on the topic of poverty and transformative leadership and makes recommendations relative to the dispositions educational leaders must employ, embrace, foster, and practice in addressing the social, cultural, and emotional needs of students to elicit and enhance student’s engagement in school that leads to academic success (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020).

Impact of “Culture of Poverty” in Educating Children

Poverty and its impact on education has been viewed from different perspectives. A widely accepted view in education comes from Ruby Payne (1995/2019) in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, that defines a “culture of poverty” as unacceptable cultural and social behaviors that are inconsistent with the attitudes of the middle class, schools, and employers, rather than a matter of income. Earlier, Lewis (1966) who coined the term “culture of poverty” asserted that people who belong to this culture showed behavior that “seems clearly patterned and reasonably predictable” (p.19). He added that the “concept of culture of poverty may help to correct misapprehensions that have ascribed some behavioral patterns of ethnic, national or regional groups as distinctive characteristics” (p.19) as he asserted that “much of the behavior accepted in the culture of poverty goes counter to cherished ideals of the larger society” (p.19).

Consequently, Payne (1995/2019) explained that students living in poverty have their own distinct culture with “hidden rules,” language, and values that are unfamiliar to the predominantly white, middle class teachers who work in urban schools with high populations of children living in poverty. Payne’s work continues to gain popularity across the United States despite its stereotypical and deficit view and its absence of scholarly research (Bomer et al., 2008). In the newest edition, Payne (2019) continues to define poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (p. 7) and explains how children living in poverty create a culture which influences their own social cognition. She expands her definition of resources to include emotional, mental/cognitive, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships, knowledge of hidden rules, and language use, and she argues that one has an ability to escape poverty, but that ability is dependent upon these resources, more than solely on finances (Payne, 2018).

Bomer and colleagues (2008) offer an additional critique of the ways in which Payne defines poverty by arguing that her definition “permits her to move poverty out of the material

realm and into a behavioral one” (p. 2511). Following this notion of “culture of poverty,” claims have been made that low-income students often lack cognitive and cultural resources which does not favor learning (Bomer et al., 2008). Educators who believe that students are unwilling to learn embrace classic forms of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997), where they blame the students and treat them as victims for their predictable poor academic performance due to the existing social and structural inequalities (Bomer et al., 2008; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). In doing so, educators absolve their responsibility from participating in and contributing to the educational failure that many children living in poverty may endure (Flint, 2018; Flores et al., 2019). This makes it easier for educators to accept the reality of the achievement gap as a manifestation of an intelligence deficit, rather than an educational systemic deficiency of effective teaching, leading, student counseling, and managing schools.

Similarly, Ullucci and Howard (2015) discuss how students and educators often buy into “culture of poverty” frameworks without knowing much about the child’s actual culture, as a way to deflect personal responsibility for the continuous gap that describes the academic achievement and academic potential for children living in poverty. While various myths have been used to counter poverty based on personal observations and misinformation, Ullucci and Howard (2015) explain four prevalent myths about poverty and its consequences: 1) anyone can pull themselves out of poverty; 2) those who are in poverty are lazy, “welfare queens,” and/or irresponsible; 3) poor children are not particularly smart or school-ready; and 4) people in poverty share a common “culture.” These and other deficit-based myths continue to infiltrate schools, bringing with them beliefs and practices that often relegate children living in poverty to feelings of hopelessness and perpetual educational and structural inequalities.

Contrary to this deficit perspective is the understanding that individuals living in poverty are only socially, culturally, and linguistically different and have their own vital abilities, skills, and life experiences, called “funds of knowledge,” that they have acquired from their diverse experiences and life struggles (González et al., Amanti, 2009). Although we acknowledge that there are many out-of-school factors (Berliner, 2009) and larger economic, social, and racial systemic deficiencies that go beyond education which impact student success (Anyon, 2005, Ullucci & Howard, 2015), a funds of knowledge orientation shows that teachers can use the practical and intellectual tools, knowledge, and experiences that students have as resources for learning in the classroom (Macias & Lalas, 2014). Gee (2013) calls this the diverse student’s primary Discourse with capital “D,” which reflects:

their ways of using language, acting, interacting, valuing, knowing, dressing, thinking, believing, and feeling as well as ways of interacting with various objects, tools, artifacts, technologies, spaces, and times so as to seek to get recognized as having a specific socially consequential identity. (p.55)

Effective teachers and school leaders recognize and value diverse students’ funds of knowledge that they bring into the classroom by adapting and applying their students’ experiences to the content that is being taught. Thus, they acknowledge their students’ socially and culturally situated backgrounds and experiences as cherished resources for learning (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020).

There has been widespread failure in explaining the achievement gap for students living in poverty as possible predictable outcomes of the inequitable ways schools are organized, school programs are implemented, and school funds are distributed (Flint, 2018). To address these and other prevailing inequities, one must gain a deep understanding of what providing *true equity* for students living in poverty entails. According to Lalas, Charest, Strikwerda, & Ordaz (2019)

providing *true equity* means offering relevant, appropriate, and meaningful school activities and strategies that are culturally and socially situated to meet the program or instructional needs of every student. They enumerated that the important functions of equity are 1) attending to the needs of the historically marginalized and deprived populations of students; 2) redressing disadvantages in terms of opportunity and social mobility; 3) providing fair and open access to all especially to students living in poverty; and 4) recognizing and honoring differences and providing opportunities by redistributing resources and services, particularly to those in greatest need. Implicit in these functions is the link between students' personal attributes and how they are influenced by social, cultural, historical, economic, and many other environmental factors.

When applying the notion of *true equity*, one could recognize, identify, and understand the intersection of poverty, race, gender, and economic power relations and its impact on social problems and generational poverty. If the impact of this intersection is manifested in the realities and circumstances that children living in poverty face, what specific steps can school leaders take to mitigate the resulting negative conditions that may affect the achievement of students? What leadership disposition qualities must school leaders possess to address these inequities? How can one develop leadership dispositions that support equity work? We believe that to address poverty, caring leaders must obligate and challenge one another to do something about changing systemic practices in education that continually perpetuate achievement disparities.

Social and Cultural Capital: Tapping Into the Assets of Students Experiencing Poverty

Before diving even deeper into discussing the dispositions of leaders in addressing the plight of students experiencing poverty, the influence of Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and social capital on the topic must be taken into consideration. According to Bourdieu (1979, 1986), disposition is the habituated way one behaves, acts, thinks, and influences the identity, actions, and choices of the individual. It is attained unconsciously through socialization in family, school, and cultural environments. It shapes a person's individual actions, aspirations, expectations, attitudes, and perceptions consistent with the social, political, economic, historical, and cultural conditions under which it was produced (Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu (1979; 1986) postulated that an individual's lived experience or habitus, though fairly resistant to change, generates new practices, perceptions, and aspirations that are consistent with the original social realities under which they were produced (Maton, 2010). However, habitus also "adjusts aspirations and expectations according to the objective probabilities for success or failure common to the members of the same class for a particular behavior" (Swartz, 1997, p. 105). Individuals react and adjust to varied social situations or "fields" which comprise a network of social contexts where people occupy certain dominant and subordinate positions based on types and amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1979; 1986). Bourdieu's habitus and fields are explanatory notions about a person's development of cultural capital and social capital that drive one's disposition which represents that person's beliefs, values, and perceptions. Bourdieu's set of lenses are briefly described below:

Types of Capital	Brief Description
Social Capital	The durable network of social relationships of mutual trust that values respectful connections, sharing of information or potential or actual resources, and obligations which strengthen and institutionalize membership in a group

Cultural Capital	High-status cultural and linguistic knowledge, skills, and dispositions passed from one generation to the next (long-lasting habits of mind and body or certain kinds of a work, literature, or sculpture or a form of objectification, as certificates and degrees)
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Pragmatically, social capital refers to the network of relationships and social connections that provide additional opportunities or resources available for individuals who are members of the group. Specifically, it provides students with access to educational resources, services, as well as curriculum and instructional support by social connections and ways of whom they already know in a particular class or by their familiarity with the teacher and the school. It is, therefore, a set of networks of social relations and resources that provide the cognitive, social, affective, and academic support that the students and their families can use to navigate through the school system. Social capital provides students with the necessary feeling of belonging in school as a comfortable place with friendly and supportive teachers, administrators, and classmates. It also fosters positive interaction with teachers and peers and as a result, promotes positive social and affective growth as well as increased student achievement. Applied to dispositional leadership, school leaders must make sure that all students develop their social capital including their positive and caring relationship with the school personnel and their peers in order for them to gain a sense of belonging in the school community and a feeling of being cared for to increase their school participation and pride.

Cultural capital refers to culturally based or culturally situated common practices and/or resources that individuals may possess that put them at an advantage over others (Lalas et al., 2019). Examples of culturally based resources, materials or practices include understanding the school tradition and philosophy of teaching, cultural awareness of the regional origins of the students in the class, knowledge about educational and school discipline practices, going to museums and art exhibits, educational credentials of teachers and administrators, academic qualifications or degrees, access to computers, aesthetic preferences on music, art, food, and other creative forms etc. Cultural capital could be identified easily as one's set way of doing things, disposition accumulated from childhood, or as a possessed set of skills, works of art, and scientific instruments that require specialized cultural knowledge and abilities to use (Lalas et al., 2019). Contrary to the common view that American public schools are melting pots where students from diverse cultures assimilate into the dominant American culture, students bring with them valuable diverse ways of knowing, learning, thinking, and acting into their classroom environments. Applied to dispositional leadership in educating students and working with teachers, other administrators, and parents, all leaders must make sure that all of their school personnel, regardless of socioeconomic status and other social and cultural identities, acquire or be exposed to cultural capital or practices that match the content, culture, and rigor of the school curriculum and instruction (Lalas et al., 2019).

Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capital focuses on the assets that diverse students and their families have acquired and passed down generationally, which can be recognized and celebrated as an inherent embodiment of their backgrounds. His notion focuses on the strength found in one's diverse cultural capital. Lareau (2011), in her book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, reported that social class influences the way families approach the rearing of their children in areas that include the organization of daily life, language use, the way they view interventions for children, and consequences pertaining to sense of entitlement or constraint. According to Lareau, "children should have roughly equal life chances. The extent to which life

chances vary can be traced to differences in aspirations, talent, and hard work on the part of individuals” (p.235). She added that, “social scientists acknowledge that there are systemic forms of inequality, including, for example, differences in parents’ educational levels, occupational prestige, and income, as well as in their child-rearing practices” (p. 235). This significantly differentiates from Payne’s view of poverty that highlights the lack of financial, family, and community resources, and the stereotypical characterization of how one lives in poverty instead of acknowledging that children living in poverty bring with them a wealth of knowledge that educators can tap into to help create a sense of belonging, engage in the classroom, and obtain academic success.

Towards an Asset-Based Paradigm Shift in Educating Students Experiencing Poverty

Contrary to the deficit-based paradigm that has driven the status quo in educational reform producing continual epic failure for students living in poverty is Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital. Bourdieu’s theory is an equitable and asset-based paradigm manifested through the valuing and recognition of the variety of socially and culturally situated ways of knowing and doing that students bring into the classroom (Flores et al., 2019). Viewing equity from a socially and culturally-situated context is an asset-based paradigm as the focus is on honoring the common practices and resources that students bring with them into the classroom as assets and being knowledgeable of the school’s philosophical approach to teaching as it relates to the students’ identities (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020). Funds of knowledge (Macias & Lalas, 2014) is also an asset-based approach that acknowledges the ways educators recognize and value the strengths and diverse experiences students bring with them into the classroom that are found in their home environments. In addition, Gee’s (2013) description of Big “D” Discourse is an asset-based approach that values student individuality, social identity, and diverse ways of knowing, thinking, and understanding the world. These asset-based philosophical approaches include mindsets, ideology, theoretical frameworks, and models which reflect our habitus regarding the particular “phenomena” pertaining to the schooling of children living in poverty. These belief systems that influence a society and the ideology of its members are defined as paradigms (Bourdieu, 1998).

Foundationally, Kuhn (1962) states, “A paradigm refers to the shared images, assumptions, and practices that characterize a community of scholars in a given field” (p. 80). Additionally, Bourdieu (1998) discusses paradigms through the shaping of state bureaucracies in the two forms of objective realities and institutionalized realities through rules, agencies, offices, and ways of thinking that reinforce and reproduce social belief systems. Furthermore, Giroux (2011) identifies how educators’ paradigms encompass their worldviews and beliefs about their position in the world based on their prior experiences and perceptions and is reinforced politically through the education they receive. The concept of a paradigm is important because it frames and guides the practitioner’s work and is related to the social and political values in the larger society as a whole (Giroux, 2011).

As Kuhn (1962) continued to discover the connotation behind the word paradigm, he postulated that a “paradigm shift” occurs when the methods legitimized by the paradigm go wrong, becoming counter to what was expected to happen--causing a crisis. A paradigm shift begins as a solution to the new crisis is needed, resulting in an extraordinary amount of new research where new ideas, methods, and theory arise which creates a shift in thinking. Importantly, Kuhn (1962) emphasizes that to accept a new paradigm, one must let go of the old paradigm.

Recently, philosophical approaches in education have been classically redefined, and one’s paradigm can be described as, “our beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes that not only guide our

perceptions about the phenomenon, but also direct our everyday schooling actions/activities, such as instructional practices, curriculum, and types of assessment used” (Flores et al., 2019, p. 10). It is challenging to talk about one’s belief system pertaining to the inherent social and cultural embodiment of children living in poverty, especially since it involves the inevitability of categories of difference found inside the classroom, which privilege some in society while marginalizing others, including differences found in race, ethnicity, language, social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability and disability conditions, and citizenship status (Lalas, et al., 2019).

When these categories of difference go unattended, they naturally result in unequal situations depending upon the groups that are structurally empowered or disadvantaged due to their diverse backgrounds (Lalas et al., 2019). According to Lalas and colleagues (2019), “... inequality, when not addressed appropriately, persists and turns into inequities, it is imperative that equity work focuses on repairing harm, restoring voice, dignity and agency and increasing democratic participation for all” (p. 44). Educational leaders must be courageous and interrogate the current deficit-based paradigm manifested in low-simplified expectations, activities, and texts, and dare to transform it into an asset-based paradigm through high-amplified opportunities for critical engagement with literacy, content, and academic concepts (Walqui & Bunch, 2020). The discussion of paradigm is significant because leaders must provide spaces for educators to name, identify, and let go of deficit views, creating an educational paradigm shift on how we work with and perceive children living in poverty. A leader’s disposition should reflect an asset-based understanding in viewing the world shaped by valuing who our students are and what experiences they bring with them that can be bridges between what they know and what they are learning as an effective and equitable way of providing what each student needs as they need them (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020).

Transformative Leadership as an Equitable Approach

Transformative leadership is an adaptation of the seminal work of James McGregor Burns (1978) where he expounded the difference between transactional and transforming leadership. Clarifying the understanding of transactional leadership, which focuses on exchange of benefits, he goes on to define transforming leadership as leadership that focuses on attitudes, norms, institutions, and behaviors that structure daily life. Transformative leadership theory is one of two leadership theories that emerged from Burns’ (1978) work (Quantz et.al., 1991; Shields, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2018, 2020; Starratt, 2010). Shields (2011) explains transformative leadership as, “begin[ning] with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others” (p. 2). It responds to the call by Capper (1989) for school leaders to “encourage social justice” using “transformative leadership which can transcend the intellectual bias in democratic schooling to the benefit of all students and staff” (p. 5). Additionally, transformative leadership has roots in various critical leadership concepts and theories including culturally relevant leadership (Khalifa, 2018) and social justice leadership (Brooks et al., 2017; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007). One feature that distinguishes transformative leadership is the manner in which it explicitly addresses the importance of knowledge frameworks and mindsets needed to dismantle and disrupt inequity and reconstruct equitable spaces (Van Oord, 2013) .

Transformative leadership (Shields, 2013, 2018) is used as a model of equitable leadership that acknowledges the existence of the unequal playing field in education. It recognizes the chasm between socioeconomic levels that grow steadily, which often requires extraordinary efforts on the part of children living in poverty to achieve academic success in school (Shields, 2011, 2013,

2018). The transformative leader works to dismantle barriers and inequities found within the “culture of power” addressed by Delpit (1988) that advantages some children while marginalizing others within our school system. “Culture of power” implies the built-in advantage is driven by a set of values and beliefs of groups of people or individuals with elevated sociopolitical status. The transformative leader moves away from the traditional deficit-based paradigm and shifts to an asset-based paradigm focused on addressing inclusion, equity, excellence, and social justice while critiquing inequitable practices in school settings. They become a bridge for helping children get what they need to be successful based on individual social and cultural identities. According to Shields (2018), this work begins with the realization that students cannot fully engage in the learning process when they have negative feelings of marginalization and exclusion as inequitable practices continue to prevail in schools. To this end, the transformative leader considers “the situations of the marginalized and oppressed and seeks to offer remedy” (Shields, 2018, p. 16).

A Case Study to Highlight Dispositions Educational Leaders Need When Addressing Students Living in Poverty

Methodology. The study utilized narrative inquiry as the qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is best when researchers desire “to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in the study address a problem or issue” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 48). Describing the centrality of human experience within narrative inquiry studies, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argue that humans are storytelling organisms who individually and socially lead storied lives. These lived experiences narrated in powerful stories were the focus of this inquiry.

Conle (2001) emphasized that narrative inquiry focuses on the study of a lived experience. He explained that narrative inquiry is a rhetorical exercise based on the art of persuasion best served to study personal experiences rooted in practice.

In this current study, narrative inquiry was used to study, understand, and reconstruct experiences while staying within narrative modes of expression throughout the process (Conle, 2001). The participants’ personal experiences were chronicled in circular dimensional practices of inquiry and discovery (Conle, 2001). The current narrative inquiry aimed to bring understanding and clarity of participants’ stories through the telling of their lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As the stories were told and recalled from memory, themes emerge through the interpretation of data sets (Conle, 2001).

Participants. The study took place in a school district in Southern California. A purposeful and convenient sampling was used to select participants as they purposefully inform an understanding of the focus in the inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A sampling of 15 participants consisting of administrators, teachers, parents, community members, and students were interviewed in the study. The research endeavored to answer the following question: What dispositions must school leaders must employ, embrace, foster, and practice in addressing the needs of children living in poverty?

Data Collection and Analysis. Data was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face conversational interviews in groups and individually. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then organized, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 10, a software used to aid in finding and interpreting emergent patterns, themes, and categories. All data was triangulated for validity.

In the research, we used four (Tenets 1, 3, 5, and 7) of the eight tenets of transformative leadership to extrapolate the dispositions that school leaders embrace, foster, and practice in addressing educational equity issues for students living in poverty. We chose these four tenets that

were closely related to the set of dispositions applicable to school administrators. The remaining four tenets, that were not chosen, aligned more with the skills and knowledge that transformative leaders use as they do their work in schools.

Tenet 1 specifies what a transformative leader does in resolving to undertake the task of affecting equitable change for all students, especially those who have been marginalized or disenfranchised, through reflection of their personal beliefs, examination of the school data, and the social, cultural and political landscape. Tenet 3 addresses the equitable distribution of power and questions the uses, types, and changes in power that need to take place to provide equity for all students. Tenet 5 focuses on dismantling institutional inequities such as discrimination, prejudice, oppression, and subjugation through emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice with the intent to establish access for opportunities with inclusion and freedom. Tenet 7 highlights the necessity of balancing critique with promise through critical examination of policies, procedures, and structures with the understanding that action must take place for equitable change to occur. From these four tenets 1, 3, 5, and 7, we extrapolated the dispositions aligned with the themes that emerged from the data collection.

We looked at the data gathered and related them to the social capital and cultural capital of district administrators, school site administrators, teacher leaders, parents, and students in a California high school setting. The specific student population at the site ranged from children living in poverty situations to students living in upper middle- and upper-class economic levels. Historically at this site, the work of the leadership team resulted in gains in academic achievement for these students as measured by increment in grade point averages (GPAs), graduation rates, and college enrollments. As a result, students' GPAs moved from 1.7 to 3.89, with the graduation rate increasing to ninety-nine percent, and the matriculation rate to 4-year institutions increasing to ninety-five percent. Using Nvivo, we looked at the emerging themes related to the extrapolated set of dispositions that aligned with the four tenets selected from the transformative leadership framework of Shields (2013, 2018).

Limitations. Limitations for this study were a small sample size and the sample population which was specific to people directly associated with the research problem. Additionally, the limited scope of the study being located at one specific school, in one specific area, and one specific time period limits the ability for the researchers to generalize the findings for all populations.

Research Findings:

The emerging dispositional domains for school leaders we extrapolated from Shields' tenets (2013, 2018) matched the identified issues found in children living in poverty. We operationally labeled four of Shields' tenets into four emerging dispositions for school leaders which are 1) creating equity; 2) creating learning environments that are representative of the demographics, equitable, and socially just; 3) arguing for democracy; and 4) addressing assumptions, biases, and stereotypes to affect change. These emerging dispositions were influenced by the themes of social capital and cultural capital that include 1) responsibility to others; 2) empowerment; 3) understanding the institutionalized culture; and 4) care--have high expectations/set priorities for action/change as captured in the chart below.

Table 1

Leadership Dispositions of School Leaders

Disposition Chart with Textual Evidence
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Emerging Dispositions for School Leaders	Themes of Social and Cultural Capital	Textual Evidence: Voices of Participants
Disposition 1: Creating equity	Responsibility to others	<p>-“We do whatever we need to do to get students caught up to speed so that they can graduate.” “The responsibility of our kids is ours.”</p> <p>-“And they committed themselves to being the village elders. Despite the fact that they no longer have a personal investment in the program, which tells the students, they do care about you.”</p> <p>-“Like this year we (adults on campus) are all taking at least one struggling kid to personally mentor and help them to do better in school.”</p> <p>-“The school reaches out to the students in any way it can. The most important thing is that we continually follow up on the kids”</p>
Disposition 2: Creating democratic, equitable and socially-just environments	Empowerment	<p>-“It empowers the parents and the community to say it’s our responsibility. They are ours. They feel empowered to go to the school and ask questions because ...they felt welcomed.”</p> <p>-“So when I met these guys I gave them carte blanche access to the campus”</p> <p>-“You need a teacher who not just cares about his students but loves his students and doesn’t want to see any of them fail. And is dedicated and is willing and can put in time to follow up with these kids. These are the type of teachers we hire.”</p>
Disposition 3: Arguing for democracy	Understanding the institutionalized culture	<p>-“We’re breaking down suspicion and building bridges.”</p> <p>-“You need somebody on the inside, somebody on the inside who’s familiar with the campus and who can help you gain access to the school district.”</p> <p>-“We worked together to support students.”</p> <p>-“...make it so those who have a problem with what we are doing understand that all students deserve a chance to succeed. We allow this group to pull students out of class, find out the problem and let these students know that they are cared about, that they are being watched and are not going to be allowed to walk around on campus in a vacuum where nobody checks on them.”</p> <p>-“... so we’re able to get face time with key organizations, the superintendents, the city council, and other people,, so we benefited from that.”</p> <p>-“We gained support from the top. The superintendent and administration had to see that there was a need, and that this could work. They must support it.”</p>

<p>Disposition 4: Addressing assumptions, biases, and stereotypes in order to affect change</p>	<p>Care-- Have high expectations/ set priorities for action/change</p>	<p>-<i>“I’d help with the grade checks and talk with the kids, try to understand why they were not getting good grades, and offer advice, counseling, and support. We would have a verbal contract with them to do better, you know. We show them that we care... say ‘hey, you know, I know you can do better’”</i></p> <p>- <i>“For our kids who are slipping through the cracks, we make every effort to catch them early hopefully and get them on the right track. And we do whatever we need to do to get them caught up to speed.”</i></p> <p>- <i>“We’re not angry at anybody. We are not here to blame anybody. We just want to take care of our kids. Along with that, we want to take care of other kids that want to go along on this journey with us. It’s not just going to be for Black kids, it’s going to be for all kids that want or need to make use of our services.”</i></p> <p>- <i>“I am meeting with students before their grades, finals, midterms, making sure they are in for tutoring. I’m checking their GPAs on a regular basis. If a student becomes ineligible to play in sports, I work to help them... I try to support and encourage their efforts.”</i></p>
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The following discussion of dispositions captured by the narratives demonstrate how the participants acknowledge and value their students’ social and cultural capital and their funds of knowledge as an asset. By using this set of dispositions, we attempt to provide a shift from the failing deficit-based paradigm towards an asset-based paradigm that is anchored and grounded not only in the recognition, but also in the celebration of one’s social and cultural capital in order to create hope and success in a continual misfiring educational system for children living in poverty (Flores et al., 2019).

Disposition 1: Create Equity

Educational leaders who embrace, practice, and foster this disposition to support an educational system that focuses on equity, democracy, and social justice educate themselves on issues of equity and have a sense of responsibility to ensure equitable policy, practices and procedures for their campus. This disposition is grounded in an ethic of critique (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2018), questioning the possibilities and opportunities that could enable children living in poverty to grow, learn, and achieve. This leader challenges inequities around barriers like power, language, oppression, privilege, and authority in their school and district. They take responsibility to make sure that equity is not only embedded in their vision and mission but also enacted.

In the current study, participants talked about how they took ownership of ensuring their students’ success, demonstrating the transformative leader’s disposition to create equity. One district leader talked about how they looked at the specific population of students that were designated to enter a particular school and intentionally included the needs of those students who were at risk of failure in their plans for student success. She talked about how knowing the varying needs of students in the district; they were able to include supports by way of counseling, language supports, and extracurricular options that supported student engagement. She explained:

Closing the achievement gap.... we started, probably as early as everyone, looking at the data, getting it really disaggregated. Our teachers were given time to work in teams to plan lessons. So ,when kids were starting to struggle finding they could find ways to reteach them. We intentionally built-in collaboration time. This wasn't just about support for English learners. It was for all struggling kids.

Another district level leader recalled how during the planning of the school there was an intentional awareness pertaining to how students from a low-socioeconomic neighborhood could attend their school and the need to ensure success for these students. A principal participant discussed personal involvement with students who had previously slipped through the cracks, and the principal described how connections with the campus community provided early interventions supporting students for graduation. This participant stated, “We do whatever we need to do to get them caught up to speed so that they can graduate.” Many participants stated that they felt a “responsibility to the students” to provide opportunities for learning in a variety of modalities and needs. The leadership was dedicated to attending to the needs of their students and providing space for others on the campus to assist. One participant, a student, stated, “They (speaking about parent leaders) committed themselves to being the village elders. Even though they no longer have a personal investment in the program, which tells the students, they do care about us.” This student had been talking about how teachers and parents supported students academically as well as socially and emotionally. They worked to create a space where students felt that they could grow and achieve.

Disposition 2: Create Democratic, Equitable, and Socially Just Learning Environments

Educational leaders who embrace, practice, and foster the disposition to create learning environments that are democratic, equitable and socially-just empower school personnel to be agents of change. They provide trainings and resources for teachers that identify learning needs to specifically address barriers that hold students living in poverty back from succeeding. They no longer ignore institutionalized inequities, but rather, they intentionally take action and they use their positional power to empower teachers, parents, and students to change their way of thinking about what an academic learning environment can look like.

Similarly, participants in this study emphasized the need to empower school personnel, students and parents when working toward student success, indicating the transformative leader’s disposition to create democratic, equitable and socially-just learning environments. Participants discussed how they took responsibility for the work and used a “village” mindset to involve others in creating learning environments that contributed to student engagement and academic growth. These learning environments supported students’ sense of belonging and demonstrated the adults’ care for them and their success. One participant, a teacher, shared how each adult on campus became a mentor to an at-risk student through an initiate of the principal to create connection between the students and the adults on campus. She talked about the opportunity that she had to get to know the student and encourage the student along their path to academic success. The participant stated, “This is not an opportunity that you get at all schools. This is intentional work that gives voice to both teachers and students.” A parent participant stated, “I’m proud that when times get tough, students come first. I feel everybody does a good job of keeping the students front and center.” This parent’s comment points to the idea of an environment that is strategically focused on supporting students’ needs. One principal stated:

You need a teacher who not just cares about his students but loves his students and doesn’t want to see any of them fail. And is dedicated and is willing and can put in time to follow up with these kids. These are the type of teachers we hire.

The principal solidifies the understanding that taking action and using one’s positional power to create democratic, equitable, and socially-just environments happens when it is done intentionally.

Disposition 3: Argue for Democracy

Educational leaders who embrace, practice, and foster the disposition to recognize the inequitable distribution of power that perpetuates oppression in schools use their influence and knowledge of the institutionalized culture to dismantle institutionalized inequities that exist within it. The educational leader uses their positional power to make decisions that respect and advance freedom for students, teachers, and parents. This leader knows and understands the institutional culture of their school and makes every effort to argue for democracy and empowers others to have a voice.

Participants in this study shared how they used their institutional knowledge for the success of students, advocating and arguing for democracy. The participants spoke about how the leader gave teachers, students, and parents a voice in the decision-making process. One participant, a principal, emphasized how he listened to the voices of frustrated parents and knew that he had to find a way to involve them in the work that the school was doing to change the culture of the school. The principal helped the parents to understand the function of the school and encouraged them to work alongside the school to support students. He assigned a teacher to work with the parents to help acclimate them to the school's structure and culture. One parent described, "You need somebody on the inside, somebody on the inside who's familiar with the campus and who can help you gain access to the school district." The teacher shared that the principal asked that he work with the parents to help them to better understand the school community and how the school functions. The teacher and the parents both shared how they did book studies and had conversations together about the district's structure. One participant emphasized how the knowledge that they gained helped them to work with the teachers, counselors, other parents, community members, and district personnel to support students' success. He said, "We gained support from the top. The superintendent and administration had to see that there was a need, and that this could work. They must support it." Another participant noted, "We worked together to support students," and then added how important it was to:

...make it so those who have a problem with what we are doing understand that all students deserve a chance to succeed. We allow this group to pull students out of class, find out the problem and let these students know that they are cared about, that they are being watched and are not going to be allowed to walk around on campus in a vacuum where nobody checks on them.

This type of shared decision-making only happens when school leaders are not afraid. The principal said it this way: "We're breaking down suspicion and building bridges." He said, "All I try to do is support the efforts of all students, teachers and parents."

Disposition 4: Address Assumptions, Biases, and Stereotypes to Affect Change

Educational leaders who embrace, practice and fosters a disposition to address assumptions, biases, and stereotypes in order to affect change must garner an ethic of care – have high expectations and set priorities for change. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2018) present the ethic of care as one paradigm used for ethical decision making. Using the ethic of care, school leaders focus on building relationships through values such as loyalty, belonging, self-worth, trust, and self-efficacy in their decision making. The educational leader provides spaces for interactions that build trust and collaboration throughout the community, which dismantle harmful assumptions and biases that hinder high expectations for students living in poverty situations.

Participants in this study exhibited how they address assumptions, biases, and stereotypes to change the culture of the school and for the success of students by building relationships, setting high expectations, and demonstrating care. One participant, a principal, talked about a group of

African American parents who came to visit him at school one day. He remembered that his secretary had called them “a group of angry Black men” as she announced that he had visitors. He recalled that when the parents came to speak with him they said:

We're not angry at anybody. We are not here to blame anybody. We just want to take care of our kids. Along with that, we want to take care of other kids that want to go along on this journey with us. It's not just going to be for Black kids, it's going to be for all kids that want or need to make use of our services.

These parents came to the principal with a plan to support all students at risk of failing. They believed that students could be successful with the right supports in place. They carried no negative assumptions of what students could do. The secretary's assumption of the parents could have halted their efforts to affect a much needed change for struggling students. However, once the plan was implemented the parents were able to mentor and encourage students by setting expectations for success. One participant, a parent leader, stated:

I'd help with the grade checks and talk with the kids, try to understand why they were not getting good grades, and offer advice, counseling, and support. We would have a verbal contract with them to do better, you know. We show them that we care... saying, 'Hey, you know, I know you can do better'.

A principal spoke about how every teacher and adult on campus mentored one or two struggling students providing academic and personal support. He challenged the adults, who were working with struggling students saying, “we make every effort to catch them early hopefully and get them on the right track. And we do whatever we need to do to get them caught up to speed.” One participant, a teacher talked about his efforts to support students and the imperative to “find out the problem and let these students know that they are cared about, that they are being watched and are not going to be allowed to walk around on campus in a vacuum and nobody checks on them.” This teacher continued to share:

I am meeting with students before their grades, finals, midterms, making sure they are in for tutoring. I'm checking their GPAs on a regular basis. If a student becomes ineligible to play in sports, I work to help them... I try to support and encourage their efforts.

The participant made it clear that all students were important and that expecting student success could only happen when the adults on campus set aside their biases and assumptions and truly care about the students and their academic success.

CONCLUSIONS: Where Do We Go From Here?

Our study shows the importance of school leadership dispositions that 1) recognize and esteem the social and cultural capital of the students living in poverty; 2) embrace democratic principles in honoring and valuing student voices from a culturally relevant view (Howard & Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017); and 3) care about all students, especially those who are from low-income families (Cummins, 2020). We also imply that educational leaders must engage in shifting their dispositional paradigms to an asset-based mindset in addressing the needs of children living in poverty. Our qualitative data supports the notion that the mandate for deep and equitable change requires reflective educational leaders who know themselves and their organizations, as well as the communities they serve (Shields, 2018). In our research, the leaders were reflective of their own knowledge and understood that to transform their schools they needed to grow in knowledge of themselves, their organization, and their students. Clearly, our research findings provided support and advanced knowledge in understanding the research literature in the areas of poverty,

the inherent embodiment of the social and cultural capital of students, transformative educational leadership, and shifting towards an asset-based paradigm.

As our study implied, school leadership may consider the dispositions addressed above to improve the practices and behaviors of all school personnel involved in the organization and allow the shift towards an asset-based paradigm to begin. The language of inclusion, equity, and social justice became the language of all involved in the transformation process of the school. The understanding that each child brings assets in the form of cultural capital, social capital, and funds of knowledge to support academic success negates the deficit-based views of education. The leadership dispositions we described in this current study support the notion that transformative educational leaders must have the capacity to create educational equity as a foundational priority for all students, argue for the emancipation and inclusion of student voice, and create democratic, equitable, and socially-just learning environments where all students can have hopeful opportunities to experience access, sense of belonging, competence, and autonomy for academic success (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

When creating *true equity*, the disposition of the educational leader plays an important role in developing, fostering, and enhancing the socially-just transformation of the school culture in attending to the needs of children living in poverty. Equity-minded leaders are bravely committed to dismantling the institutionalized inequitable practices that exist in their schools. They acknowledge that the cultural and social capital of all students should be recognized and honored, especially when working to engage and empower children living in poverty in order for them to envision and embrace the reality that they themselves are a valuable part of the school culture and community. Finally, they do so with the understanding that educational equity is a long-lasting advocacy fastened to the hope that change is attainable with the resolve and courage found inside the redemption of the struggle.

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