

Courageous conversations about race, class, and gender: Voices and lessons from the field

By: [Katherine Cumings Mansfield](#) and Gaëtane Jean-Marie

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to present a qualitative secondary analysis of two empirical studies that focused on the leadership practices of female practitioners at the secondary level engaging in discourse and practices to disrupt educational inequities. The guiding research question is, “How do school leaders engage in courageous conversations to: (1) transform beliefs and practices concerning educational inequities, and; (2) engender equity to enhance learning for all students?” Building on Singleton and Linton’s (2006) framework on courageous conversations, this study examines how some school leaders break the silence and interrogate educational inequities to improve schools. Findings explicate how conversations amongst practitioners can be the impetus for transformative actions, which in turn, lead to the educational achievement of all students. The voices of participants are magnified and lessons from the field are forwarded.

Keywords: race | gender | class | social justice | qualitative secondary analysis

Article:

Race/ethnicity, class, gender, and other identity markers and their relationships with educational access and achievement are the “elephant in the room” topics in many US schools. While scholars have studied inequities in schools (Jean-Marie, 2008; Mansfield, 2011; Mickelson, 2003a, 2003b; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004), few practitioners interrogate how race and other identity markers shape the educational milieu of students. Rather, these issues often take a backseat to accountability measures regarding student achievement. Yet, ironically, discrimination based on students’ perceived identities is often at the forefront of educational policies and practices that are related to educational access and achievement.

The purpose of this paper is to present a qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) (Gladstone, Volpe & Boydell, 2007; Hinds, Vogel, & Clarke-Steffen, 1997; McCaston, 2005) of two empirical studies that focused on the leadership practices of female practitioners at the secondary level engaging in discourse and practices to disrupt educational inequities. The guiding research

question is, “How do school leaders engage in courageous conversations to: (1) transform beliefs and practices concerning educational inequities; and (2) engender equity to enhance learning for all students?” Building on Singleton and Linton’s (2006) framework on courageous conversations, this study examines how some school leaders break the silence and interrogate educational inequities to improve schools. Findings explicate how conversations amongst practitioners can be the impetus for transformative actions, which in turn, lead to the educational achievement of all students. The voices of participants are magnified and lessons from the field are forwarded.

Literature review

It is beyond the scope of this study to give a detailed examination of all the pertinent literature concerning the nexus of student identities, issues of educational access and achievement, and the importance of courageous conversations that address these issues. However, we give a brief overview to scaffold the current discussion. Before doing so, similar to Skrla et al. (2004), to situate our work on educational inequity, we draw upon Scott’s (2001) definition of systemic equity:

Systemic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner – in whatever learning environment that learner is found – has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life. (p. 6)

Our view of educational inequity is closely tied to Scott’s definition and we also more broadly frame educational inequity within a social justice perspective to account for a larger system of schooling practices characterized by inequities that are expressed in multiple dimensions of schooling (Skrla et al., 2004).

Student identities and the schooling experience

Historically, the prevailing presumption has been that US public schools are, as purveyors of a democratic culture where the “American Dream” is within reach of all who desire it, “blind” to the race, gender, class, and religion of students who attend them (Adams, 1997; Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 2002). However, relatively recently, numerous researchers have argued that identity markers such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender are related to educational access and achievement (Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004; Lareau, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Mansfield, 2011; Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Rodriguez & Fabionar, 2009; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007; Valencia & Suzuki, 2001). Individual and institutionalized forms of inequities along race/ethnicity, gender, and class (see Figure 1) dramatically continue to have an effect on educational attainment and the achievement gap (Nieto, 2004; Weis & Fine, 1993). Within schools, the reproduction of class, race, and gender relations and privilege often place students of color, whom are most often living at the intersection of multiple identity markers, at a disadvantage for learning (Jean-Marie, 2008; Nieto, 2004).

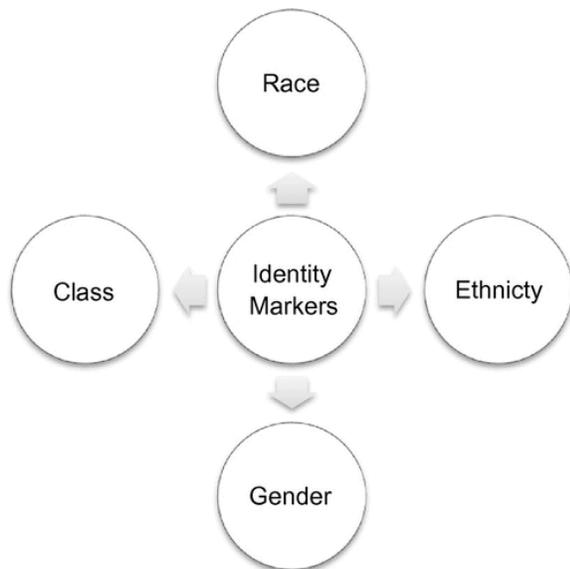


Figure 1. Identity intersectionality markers of inequalities in schools.

In any examination of educational access, it is critical to include a discussion of students' socioeconomic status or social class. Regardless of their gender or race/ethnicity, if students live in economically divested areas (both urban and rural), they will also attend under-resourced schools, resulting in a default educational caste system (Eaton, 2006; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2002). Moreover, poor children in high-poverty schools perform worse than similarly poor children who attend schools without a high poverty rate. Similarly, the achievement level of non-poor children is reduced if they attend schools with higher, overall poverty. However, race and ethnicity are closely tied with socioeconomic status (Eaton, 2006). Orfield (2002) notes that, "Poverty and its consequences underlie social separation, but it is difficult to separate poverty from race and ethnicity – particularly for African-Americans and Latinos, who are strongly discriminated against in the housing market" (p. 10). Additionally, schools have historically segregated students according to race/ethnicity mostly in the form of tracking (Garza et al., 2004; Margolin, 1994; Oakes, 2005; Scribner, 1999; Southworth & Mickelson, 2007; Valencia & Suzuki, 2001). In fact, "the greater the representation of minority group students, the greater the utilization of separate educational tracks" (Margolin, 1994, p. 19). For example, Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately overrepresented in special education programs while in contrast, disproportionately underrepresented in gifted and advanced placement programs (Clotfelter, 2004; Oakes, 2005; Valencia & Suzuki, 2001).

Disproportionate representation in gifted programs is also a concern in terms of gender. For example, during the elementary school years, the numbers of boys and girls identified for gifted programs are fairly balanced. However, during the secondary school years, boys are more heavily represented (Pipher, 1994; Sadker, 1999), with the gender gap especially prominent when it comes to math and science (Sadker, 1999). While Newkirk (2002) agreed with Sadker's findings, and cautions educators from participating in a "disadvantage competition" when it comes to gender, he also reported that the gap between eighth-grade boys' and girls' writing was "over six times greater than the differences in mathematical reasoning" (p. 315). Mickelson (2003a) conjoins prior research by pointing out that the achievement and attainment patterns of male students are "bimodal" in that they are more likely, when compared to females, to be "both

academic stars and school failures” (p. 373). Others agree, noting the larger proportion of boys in the highest level math and science course work as well as special education classes, accompanied by males’ disproportionate decline in college attendance and graduation (Glazer, 2005; Tyack & Hansot, 2002).

In addition to academic segregation, students can also be constrained by the way they are disciplined by school authorities. Males are disciplined in greater numbers than females (Ferguson, 2002; Kindlon & Thompson, 2002) and overall, males remember their school experiences much less positively than do females, recalling “painful” memories of severe “alienation” (Kindlon & Thompson, 2002). Ferguson (2002) contends that pain and alienation is exacerbated if the male student is African-American for whom school was a place to be “marginalized to the point of oblivion” (p. 585). Indeed, Blacks and Hispanics are disciplined more often and more harshly and drop out of school at disproportionately higher rates than White or Asian students (Garza et al., 2004; Oakes, 2005; Rumberger & Rodríguez, 2002; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

Within the expansive body of research on schooling in the United States, students of color are consistently stigmatized as underachievers and pathologically inferior (see e.g. August & Hakuta, 1997; Baxley & Boston, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1990; Nieto, 2004; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Troyna, 1984). A growing number of scholars argue that to address inequities for diverse student populations, educational leaders must have a heightened awareness of educational inequities in a field struggling to meet the needs of all children (e.g. Bogotch, 2005; Furman & Shields 2005; Jean-Marie, 2008; Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin 2005; Merchant & Shoho, 2006; Smulyan, 2000; Winant, 2004).

School leaders’ contextual awareness of systemic inequities

Many researchers argue (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2008; Brooks & Miles, 2008; Brown, 2006; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Jean-Marie, 2008; Mansfield, 2011, 2014; Marshall, Young, & Moll, 2009; Oliva, Anderson, & Byng, 2009; Theoharis, 2007) that the ability of the school leader to cultivate educational equity, access, and achievement in diverse contexts depended heavily on taking an explicitly activist stance while developing the school culture. Likewise, Dantley and Tillman (2009) contend that it was imperative that school leaders recognized the “multiple contexts within which education and educational leadership exist[ed]” (p. 22). Similarly, Shields (2004) purports that if school principals acknowledged students’ various identities while they were developing their leadership practices, the result would be a more caring pedagogy. “When children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success” (p. 122). As such, leaders must fully deconstruct the realities of students’ lives and the ways their leadership practices may or may not reproduce marginalizing conditions.

Several scholars assert that effective school leaders who have an awareness of broad social and cultural realities of students and their schooling experiences will actively critique marginalizing behaviors and attitudes in their own leadership style and practices as well as those in their school community (Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Jean-Marie, 2008, 2009; Lyman, Ashby, &

Tripses, 2005). Furthermore, democratic principles such as listening to the voices of others were practiced as well as professed. Leadership followed the path of recognition and knowledge, followed by engaging in dialog with others, in turn followed by action that promoted change (Furman, 2004; Lyman et al., 2005). School leaders with social justice awareness are cognizant of the nested contexts of their schools and the ways in which societal norms are translated into educational, economic, and political biases. These school leaders are viewed as social justice leaders whose practices involve acknowledging that schools do not exist in a vacuum and recognizing that schools can be sites of reproduction of, or resistance to, injustice found in the greater context (Dantley, 2003; Lott & Webster, 2006).

Conceptual framework

As a framework for understanding how school leaders move beyond the rhetoric of talking about issues of inequity to challenge the status quo (Jean-Marie, 2005), we draw upon the work of Singleton and Linton's (2006) conceptualization of courageous conversations. Singleton and Linton's (2006) extensive work with schools in the US is focused on race to "help educators improve the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the lowest- and highest- performing groups and eliminating the predictability and disproportionality of which racial groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories" (p. 27). While they focused on race, we believe this framework can be utilized to more broadly consider discussions on educational inequities as they relate to identity intersectionalities discussed above. The concept, courageous conversations, is premised on three factors for school systems to close the achievement gap and address educational inequities: passion, practice, and persistence (see Figure 2). It is not be construed that a combination of passion, practice, and persistence automatically results in the facilitation of courageous conversations. Rather, one is hard-pressed to practice courageous conversations unless they possess and practice these three essential qualities.

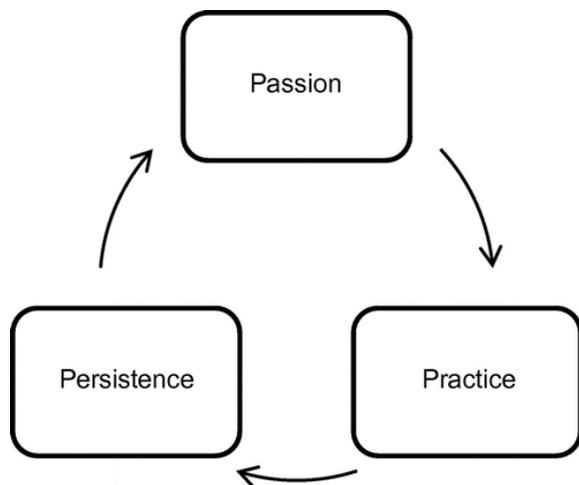


Figure 2. A tripod approach to courageous conversations about educational inequities.

Passion

Passion is defined as the level of connectedness and energy educators bring to social justice work in their commitment to district, school, and/or classroom equity transformation (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Through passion, school leaders confront resistance against change and school system's resilience to maintain the status quo (i.e. tracking minority students, limited placement of minority students in gifted and advanced program, etc.). These school leaders are unrelenting in transforming beliefs and practices to promote learning for all and create access for students who historically have been marginalized. Singleton and Linton's (2006) emphasis of passion is premised on the "heart" of leadership:

With passion, we engage our soul and our being in this work, along with our mind and our body ... will have the strength not only to stand up for what is right but to do what it is right for them as well. (p. 12)

Passion in this regard is equated with the 'fire in the belly', a term coined by a participant in Merchant and Shoho's (2006) study. As quoted in their study, 'fire in the belly' comes from the capacity to recognize the injustice but also having cultivated a foundational self-confidence and self-assurance (p. 98). This is cultivated through a strong philosophical base and a sense of competence and security in self that involves self-scrutiny.

School leaders who are steeped in this level of passion support the quest for critical approaches to change school culture and conditions that traditionally have addressed inequities on a peripheral level. In further support of this, Walker (2006) contends that the first and last task of a school leader is fostering hope that will transform what [s/he] seeks to generate, at individual, organizational, and societal levels. But this cannot happen in a vacuum or superficially. School leaders' critical assessment of their experience, practices, assumptions and beliefs about race, gender, and other biases are important. As Mansfield notes in Lyman, Strachan, Lasaridou, and Coleman (2012), self-knowledge and acceptance of one's own ethnicity, culture, and background are important components of personal conviction, motivation, and awareness of social justice issues, attributes of leaders desirous of creating schools where moral values, justice, respect, care, and equity are guiding lights (p. 36). From passion, school leaders engage in specific practices to address issues of inequities in schools.

Practice

Passion is the impetus for transformative practices – the second strand within the courageous conversations model. Practice refers to essential individual and institutional actions taken to effectively educate every student to his or her full potential (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 6). At the practice level, passion energizes school leaders to take actions that address the achievement gap and tackle institutionalized inequities (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Skrla et al., 2004). For example, school leaders draw on equity and context-specific issues directly involving their schools or indirectly through the district and use data to identify patterns of marginalization. Skrla et al. (2004) purport in their work on equity audits – a tool to guide schools in working toward equity and excellence (i.e. teacher quality equity, programmatic equity, and achievement equity), that school leaders will need to have access to practical tools to use in developing a more comprehensive, more insightful understanding of equitable and inequitable relationships in their current systems. Whether it is equity audits (Skrla et al., 2004) or other approaches, school

leaders may need to utilize data-based tools in order to leverage educational equity in the climate of high-stakes accountability. Regardless of the specific approach taken, school leaders must have a “laser-like focus” on practices that “strive to achieve the vision of an equitable school system [that] refrain from blaming underserved students for the system’s failures” (Singleton & Linton, 2006; p. 69).

Persistence

The final strand of the courageous conversations model is persistence – the long-term time and energy commitment to remain focused on equity to close the achievement gap (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Persistence orchestrates the hard work of cultural transformation in schools. Time and effort are devoted to instructional improvement and school leaders garner resources to remove barriers for teachers and staff (i.e. increase their effectiveness with students of color in the classroom). Singleton and Linton (2006) assert that persistence is staying the course in pursuit of equity because persistent educators consistently and collectively push forward with their transformation ideas (p. 211). They caution that without persistence, schools will continue to drift from one school improvement initiative to the next without developing capacity for lasting, systemic change. Similarly, Fullan’s (2010) work on capacity building argues change takes time and can only occur if careful attention is given to building trust and other important social processes.

Methods

For the purpose of this study, we draw upon QSA (Gladstone et al. 2007; Heaton, 1998; McCaston, 2005) to examine how school leaders are engaging school members (i.e. teachers, students, parents, and community) about educational inequities for an improved understanding to better serve the needs of all learners. QSA is defined as the use of existing data collected from prior studies to pursue a new research question or utilize alternative theoretical perspectives (Gladstone et al. 2007; Heaton, 1998). While utilizing quantitative data in secondary analyses is quite common, using qualitative data similarly is an emerging phenomenon (see e.g. Barbour & Eley, 2007; Heaton, 1998; Witzel, Medjedović, & Kretzer, 2008).

Interest in the use of QSA for our current study stemmed from conversations about our similar research on women, leadership, and social justice which led to subsequent conversations about Singleton and Linton’s (2006) framework on courageous conversations. Based on our discussions, we concluded that we should re-examine our primary data (i.e. interviews, observational and field notes, and documents analysis) to examine a new empirical question on how school leaders are engaging in courageous conversations to address educational inequities, distinct from the original studies (Heaton, 1998; Hinds et al., 1997; Szabo & Strang, 1997).

Following the lead of Heaton (1998), Hinds et al. (1997), and Szabo and Strang (1997), we adhered to ethical considerations for using QSA. First, we examined original interview transcripts, observational notes, documents, and field notes from both studies to check for compatibility of the data with QSA; thus, allowing additional in-depth analysis. Second, QSA is tenable if secondary analysts have access to the original data. Since we were either the lead or solo researcher, we were well-positioned as secondary analysts to access and reanalyze tapes,

interview transcripts, and field notes. Third, we followed the recommendations of Witzel et al. (2008) and provided an overview of the original studies' designs and methods in addition to our process and account of categorizing and summarizing the data for the QSA (Witzel et al., 2008). Lastly, we took into consideration the ethical issues involved in the use of original data as outlined by Hinds et al. (1997) and based on our professional judgment, we believe that the re-use of the data does not violate the contract we made with participants in the original studies.

Overview of original/primary studies

Primary study 1

The original study was a two-year ethnography that examined the development of a new public magnet school founded to meet the needs of racial/ethnic minority girls from challenging economic circumstances in a major metropolitan area in Texas (see Mansfield, 2011). The 35 participants included the principal, teachers, students, and parents as well as members of the central office administration, school board, and the private foundation that partially funded the school. Adult participants consisted of the founding members of the school and student participants were drawn from the first graduating class of 2014.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected via interviews with adults and focus groups with students that lasted between one and three hours. Conversations were supported by participant observation over a two-year period and supplemented by document analysis. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Following Wolcott (1994) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (2002), quotations from participants as well as excerpts from observational field notes and collected documents played a role in capturing participants' meanings. Emulating the work of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (2002), and Olesen (2005), several readings of interview transcripts and listening for complex perspectives, multiple voices, and recurring refrains occurred. Open coding of interview transcripts line-by-line to note consistent themes or story lines was conducted followed by "focused coding" that consisted of additional readings of the data utilizing the theoretical framework to carefully filter initial impressions. A similar process of identifying symbols, themes, and patterns was used while examining data collected via participant observation, photography, and documents.

Primary findings

One theme that emerged with all participants in the study concerned how this school was different from any other school in more ways than just being one of the first single-sex public schools in Texas. Parents extolled the caring nature of the faculty and administration and remarked on how thankful they were that their daughters were finally in a rigorous learning environment. One parent said, "This is more than a school. They're preparing you for life." Parents also expressed appreciation for the conversations and course assignments that helped students recognize and discuss racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. They also remarked how "awesome" it was that students were learning to be tech savvy as well as learning strong leadership skills. Students also spoke of the school's uniqueness. One student remarked, "It's the

opposite of every school I've ever been to" in how the teachers and principal "really care for us." Another student added, "We're like family." Teachers also noted how working at the school was a welcome relief from their prior experiences. On more than one occasion, teachers remarked about how they "finally worked where everyone worked as hard as I do and care as much as I do" or how "I finally have a principal who 'gets it' and really cares about these girls and supports what I do." The principal believed much of its uniqueness derived from the fact that she was afforded the autonomy to create a positive school culture from the "ground up." She also felt one major difference lie in the fact that she "loves these girls" because she "was these girls." The principal communicated on several occasions of her personal experiences with racism, sexism, and classism and how important it was that she approached the development of this new school with these realities in mind. But rather than just "help students know what they're up against," she felt it was important to help empower girls to become strong women. And that was done through rigorous formal curriculum, student-centered pedagogy, reality-driven informal curriculum, and most of all: through developing deep, caring relationships.

Primary study 2

Using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; Munhall & Boyd, 1993), in this original study (e.g. see Jean-Marie, 2009), the professional experiences (formal and informal leadership preparation; leadership and management practices; and issues of diversity, race, and gender) and challenges of 11 female high school principals in one southwestern state were examined. The participants from this earlier study represented six urban and suburban districts. The sample included seven Caucasians, two African-Americans, one Native American, and one Lebanese-American. Six of the participants were 55 years old or older, and nine were married or were once married. Four of the principals had doctoral degrees; three had 30 years of experiences as educators, five had 11 or more years in administration including headships in more than one site (i.e. experienced principal), while four were at the other end of the continuum in that this was their first placement as a principal and at a high school (i.e. novice principal).

Data collection and analysis

Data collection included open-ended, semi-structured interviews, and each interview lasted approximately 90 min. Participants were asked 15 questions (i.e. sample questions included: what made you decide to enter administration? what core principles guide your leadership practices? how do you define diversity and how does your school embrace diversity? how does your gender and/or race impact your role as an administrator? what challenges do secondary female administrators confront today? what recommendations would you suggest to improve/eliminate these challenges? what recommendations would you suggest to recruit more secondary female administrators to the profession?). Based on the research design and themes derived from the review of literature, each question was constructed to collect information for comparative analysis. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and reviewed for emergent themes and patterns. Analysis of the eleven interviews involved identifying codes and themes generated by participants and the comparison of these themes with the existing literature. As maintained by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), analyzing the data involved a systematic process of collecting it, organizing it, dividing it into manageable units, synthesizing it searching for patterns, and determining what was important and what should be reported.

Primary findings

Three major findings dominated the discourse of the participants in this study. First, the principals articulated the importance of engaging in collaborative efforts that cultivated leadership for improved student learning through consensus building efforts. These efforts represented relational dimensions of leadership practices where openness and trust were fostered. Second, another common element of relationship building was their approach to leadership. Specifically, principals connected their spiritual beliefs and values as having a direct influence on how they led their schools (i.e. articulated their beliefs and spiritual commitment about furnishing help and being of service to teachers, students, and the community). Finally, the leadership styles of the principals indicated an understanding of diversity and leadership for social justice (i.e. addressing the needs of the least ‘voiced’ in their schools such as marginalized students, students on drugs, teen pregnancy, low SES students, students who have incarcerated parents, students who live alternative lifestyles, students who are involved with juvenile justice system, and those who are sexually abused.). Relatedly, gender and race played significant roles in the leadership experiences of these principals. Several women expressed concerns that in order to be successful as females they needed to be assertive, more male-like qualities than female-like qualities. While issues of gender permeated the discussion, of equal importance were issues of race. Much like their leadership experiences as women, there was an unconscious assumption by several of the women that race did not matter when it is in fact present in much of their discussion and race (un)consciousness resonated within their perspectives.

Overview of current/QSA study

The exploratory nature of QSA facilitated our interest to re-examine our original studies using Singleton and Linton (2006) framework. The guiding research question for this current study is: “How do some school leaders engage in courageous conversations with school members (i.e. teachers, students and parents) to: (1) transform beliefs and practices concerning educational inequities; and (2) engender equity to enhance learning for all students?”

Using a comparative, thematic approach, the analysis focused on the detection of themes on the tenets of courageous conversations. All the interview transcripts, observational and field notes, and document analysis from the two primary data-sets were revisited for inclusion in the QSA. After sorting through the data, the QSA study focused on a subset of primary data originally conducted by the authors, representing school leaders who were ‘talking and walking’ (Dantley & Tillman, 2009) about how to disrupt beliefs and practices that perpetuate inequities in educational outcomes for those who historically have been marginalized because of race/ethnicity, class, gender, etc. Specifically, we focused on participants whose philosophical beliefs about educational inequities were at their forefront of their practices. Based on that, our QSA focused on four exemplars (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Overview of QSA participants.

| Study 1 | Study 2 |
|--|--|
| Maria, a 35-year-old multi-ethnic female principal with 10 years professional experience | Gertrude, an African-American female principal, had been in public education for 18 years, began her first principalship position at the age of 44 |
| Tanya, a 45-year-old white female teacher with 20 years professional experience | Linda, a white female principal with 35 years of experience in public education, began her first principalship at the age of 50 |

Maria, a multi-ethnic female in her thirties chose to return to her poverty-stricken and often criminally violent community after receiving her administrative credentials to “pay it forward.” She was hired as principal because she understood first-hand contextual and identity complexities of people of color and her ability to have critical conversations about deficit thinking with teachers and parents. Moreover, she had a record of turning around schools establishing a positive culture and making curricular and pedagogical changes that better met the needs of diverse students. Within the same school, the teacher that most exemplified a commitment to engage in courageous conversations around race, class, and gender with parents and students was Tanya. Tanya, a white English teacher and self-professed feminist, boldly engaged (or attempted to engage) parents, students, and fellow educators in conversations about whiteness and white privilege, sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia.

The other two exemplars are Principals Gertrude and Linda. Gertrude, an African-American female principal, had been in public education for 18 years. She began her first principalship position at the age of 44 and had been a principal at Albert High School for eight years. Albert High was located in a suburban school district with more than 14,000 students in 25 schools from grades Pre-K–12. A native New Yorker, Gertrude settled with her family in this suburban community. Linda, a Caucasian female principal with 35 years of experience in public education, began her first principalship at age 50 at Chester High School. She was born and raised in the town where she was a principal. Over the years, she had developed strong ties with her constituents (parents, community, elected officials, university partners, etc.) in an effort to build strong community support for her school. She commented, “I’m a political person. I put all my energy into the school.” In sum, this QSA study highlights the narratives of the four participants that purposefully link their personal background and professional experiences revealing their passion, practice, and persistence to disrupt the status quo about educational inequities.

Findings

In the ensuing discussion, we share our findings based on the re-analysis of our two studies within the courageous conversations conceptual framework. Our findings depict how practitioners in our studies exemplified the constructs of passion, persistence, and practice in their commitment to engage fellow educators in courageous conversations about race/ethnicity, gender, class, and other markers.

Passion: confronting resistance to change the status quo

Maria and Tanya exemplified Singleton and Linton’s (2006) framework of passion because they especially possessed self-knowledge and acceptance of one’s own ethnicity, culture, and background and understood how personal experiences were important components to personal

and professional convictions and motivations. In her initial interview, Maria shared, “I love these girls. I was these girls.” In later interviews, she reiterated her impetus for engaging in her anti-racist/classist/sexist work and how it related to her identity as a poor multi-ethnic female:

I think a large part of it came from my own experiences in schooling, and I think I related to the girls because I grew up in a very similar circumstance. I grew up in poverty and had very little opportunity in terms of school ... And I think that when I looked at the girls, when I saw what their challenges were, and things that they were facing and also the opportunity to make a difference in that and to change it to where it was acceptable for them to be different, to be smart, and to get out of that cycle of poverty, that it was something that was very personal to me.

Additionally, she spoke of about her observations that so many of the schools that serve poor and minority students are staffed with “poor quality teachers that weren’t interested in teaching” and how her prior experiences as a student, teacher, and leader in those schools were “part of my inspiration.” She also spoke of her experiences with historically racist school finance schemes and how important it was to not only recognize unjust practices in larger society but to “educate the children that were there about what was going on and that there was a lot of social injustice.”

Also working alongside Maria was Tanya who was equally attuned to the injustices she saw and worked to transform. Tanya was very cognizant of her “whiteness” and bravely engaged her students and fellow educators in conversations concerning white privilege. Unfortunately, these conversations were met with resistance from parents. She reported that she was “accused of being a racist” because of her discussions. Parents contacted her as well as Maria via phone and/or email to complain. Tanya shared that she “can’t stop talking about race just because someone thinks that makes me a racist.” She added that faulty thinking would mean she would have to also stop talking about sex and gender because “would make me a sexist and a homophobe and that just wasn’t true.”

Her passion for teaching about gender was evident on many occasions via observation of classroom lessons as well as documented in recorded interviews. Tanya integrated what she called, “a strong women’s studies component into all I do.” For example, rather than just have students memorized the definitions and spellings of weekly vocabulary words, she also interrogated the origins of words and how and why they have been used throughout history:

I mean, there’s hero-heroine. I asked the girls, “What’s a hero? Who’s a hero?” They come up with words like: men, strong, brave, adventurous, and so on. And then I say, “What’s a heroine? Who is a heroine?” And they’re like, “a female who is a hero?” And I say, “Look it up! Find ‘heroine’ in the dictionary! Tell me where that word comes from!” And so they did. And you know what they found? They found out that “heroine” is the *diminutive* of hero! I mean, what’s up with that? Why does the *male* get to be the great big hero and the *female* just a *little bit* of a hero?

Tanya also challenged the girls to understand literary concepts traditionally taught in English courses. For example, when studying plot and the variety of roles that are assigned to characters, the students found that – even in the most highly regarded texts – female characters were usually

given very stereotypical roles. However, male characters were usually afforded a plethora of complex characteristics and identities. Tanya used these examples from the curriculum to discuss real-world problems the girls are facing:

We have had *long* conversations about how women are expected to fall into those usual literary roles. And we talk about how when they are adults and try to break into new fields of study that other people will try very hard to place them back into those neat little categories where they think they belong ... and how they are going to have to fight tooth and nail to not let that happen.

Similar to Principal Maria and Teacher Tanya, a common thread between the other two exemplars – Principals Linda and Gertrude was that they believed in, valued, and were committed to educational equity for all learners. Linda, whose high school student population was 77 percent Caucasian, valued opportunities to engage in teaching and learning processes that impacted the minority student population in her school. Briefly recalling her childhood years, Linda talked about her upbringing with regard to diversity and values, and stated:

I was lucky to be raised by parents who weren't prejudiced. Growing up, I didn't understand prejudice until I watched it on TV in the 1960s. It was then I recognized there were racial problems. I didn't grow up that way. We must recognize that everyone doesn't think or come from the same background the way "you" do. We can work together no matter what the situations are.

Her family and cultural context influenced Linda's core leadership values. She articulated how she was investing her energy into her school:

I want to be here and take care of my students and staff. Most of my time is focused on building our culture through an understanding of the kids who are in this school. I stay connected so that we [teachers and staff] understand the challenges each student faces – black, white, Native American, girls, boys, LGBT, etc. I don't pass this responsibility off to someone else. I have to model this for my staff so they are not ignorant to the challenges our students face, in particular high-poverty, minority children.

Referencing the diversity of her suburban high school, Gertrude stated:

Diversity is about difference not deference ... we have students on the high and low end of the socioeconomic status [SES]. We have a strong middle class school; but we have some kids who are way up in terms of SES. Then we have kids who are just trying to make it.

Gertrude regularly encouraged staff members to view the school and society through the eyes of students and the communities they come from. Articulating that she's a teacher first and how important it was to have that dedication or calling, her passion about addressing the inequities that have hindered opportunities for low performing students in her school is community focused. She noted,

It's important to reach the community, in particular those who are struggling economically and sometimes teachers unfairly label them as failures. They are our kids. We have to reach all of them. Excuses are not tolerated. I don't accept the labeling. So, I challenge my teachers to do better. Even in this suburban school, we talk about poverty and race. It can't only be about academics.

Practice: building capacity for achieving equity and excellence for all learners

A second theme that emerged among the four participants was that they were firmly committed to building capacity to achieve equity and excellence for all learners and created spaces in schools to address inequalities. For example, Principal Maria exuded that "laser-like focus" is so important to implement practices that will move institutions forward in their quest to educate a diverse student body to their full potential. For example, she mentioned on many occasions that "hiring the right teachers was the most important thing I did as a leader." Furthermore, she stated:

Making sure that people that were in the room with the students understood where they came from, were empathetic to their situation, but not having sympathy on them to the point where they were hindering them. And that was one of the things that I was looking for. Somebody that's going to challenge them, push them, love them, and provide that environment because that's what makes the school function right.

This attitude also emerged from Teacher Tanya who also shined the spotlight on (in) justices. Her practices in the English classroom were directly related to her beliefs and passion for discussing race, gender, and class issues. Additionally, she refused to blame underserved student for the school system's failure to facilitate their growth through her teaching discipline. Rather, like her fellow colleagues, she implemented tutoring sessions and students were free to call her on her cell phone with questions about homework or to further discuss concepts covered in class. On several occasions, during observations of her (and her colleagues), she repeated these types of phrases to students: "We will not let you fail at this school." "You are smart. You can do this. If you aren't getting it, it means we need to try something else."

Building on this, Principals Gertrude and Linda also articulated how their practices were aligned with their core values to eliminate inequities. Dominating their experiences was their commitment to advance the conversations of issues related to diversity and equity in school practices. Principal Linda shared several books that she and her staff were reading: Alfred Tatum's (2005) *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap*; Jawanza Kunjufu's (2002) *Black Students, Middle Class Teachers*; and Alan Blankstein's (2004) *Failure Is Not an Option*. She asserted that "I'm reading things all the time and that informs my practice on a daily basis" to challenge unequal power relationships based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, language, and other systems of oppression. She also talked extensively on how she fostered ongoing conversations with her school community about the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind and heart she believed essential in developing and nurturing all her students into informed citizens.

Further, Linda was also attentive to the increasing diversity of her school and ensured that students had opportunities to embrace their diversities along race/ethnicity, gender, and LGBT through her efforts to support student clubs (e.g. Black Student Association; Latino Group; Gay, Straight Alliance) along these markers:

We have 45 different cultures in our school, and we have 17 Katrina kids here. So everybody's diverse. Everybody has a different way of learning. There are 1750 ways of looking at learning as far as our kids go. We have to be specialists in looking at individual needs. What we believe here at Chester is it's good to see your [ethnic] group and to be part of your [ethnic] group. We want to celebrate all the different kinds of people and groups.

Gertrude also sought ways to motivate teachers to help transform their instructional practices to serve the needs of the diverse student population in the school. For example, she regularly visited different classrooms to participate with teachers and students in multicultural activities. She asserted, "I'll jump in there, do various exercises and motivational techniques. I want to model this for my teachers." Probing deeper into the data, Gertrude mentioned the in-depth multicultural training she conducted occasionally in her district and annually for her teachers. She discussed her staff training, which grew into a two-week series with teachers and students:

At the beginning of each school year, I provide a one-hour staff development training session with my staff. We ask teachers to implement instructional strategies by putting students in groups to examine issues of race. Teachers ask students in their groups to respond to this question, "Have you ever been looked upon unfavorably because of your race/ethnicity?" Students share their experiences. I do this so that my teachers are more cognizant of ethnic awareness, students' contributions, and different learning styles. I want all my teachers to become aware of the composition of their classes and school by listening to the voices of students. I call it the three prongs: *Accept. Accommodate. Affirm.* We have to accept our students, accommodate them based on their learning styles, and affirm them.

Both Gertrude and Linda's leadership practices focused on recognizing and embracing the diversity of their students' demographic and promoting efforts (i.e. instructional leadership) to build on the strength of students' diversity.

Persistence: tenacious travelers on precarious paths

Just as practices seemed to naturally flow from passions, the quality of persistence emanated unsurprisingly from the practices. Singleton and Linton (2006) emphasize that persistence involves a significant investment in time and energy to remain focused despite possible distractions. It means doing what it takes to stay the course in pursuit of equity and transformation.

Persistence was evident in both Principal Maria and Teacher Tanya. For example, during the school's first year, Maria "counseled" two teachers to transfer to another school. She had engaged all teachers in courageous conversations concerning race, gender, and class and found

that these particular individuals possessed and pronounced deficit perspectives about learners who are African-American and Latina, as well as made some unsavory remarks about families from lower class backgrounds. These particular teachers also expressed discomfort about “working with all girls” and “being around all these females.” Maria carefully confronted these teachers about their discomforts and found that they were unable or unwilling to thoroughly examine and rethink beliefs. While Maria’s conversations were unflinching, they also emanated from a place of caring. Both these teachers later shared that they left because they did not “fit” with the mission of the school and that there were “no hard feelings.”

Teacher Tanya’s persistence met with some resistance from parents during the second year of operations. She had devoted herself to continuous improvement in her instructional offerings to remove barriers and further open up opportunities for transformative learning experiences. One particular assignment met with serious pushback from a couple of what she called, “squeaky wheel” parents, but Tanya refused to back down.

The controversy began when Tanya decided to have students research a variety of “women’s issues” that intersected with race, class, sexuality, and other cultural issues such as: The AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa; the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in American teen populations; female genital mutilation in Somalia; and human trafficking Texas. The curriculum required students to learn the processes of finding trustworthy sources, taking precise notes, crafting appropriate citations, and synthesizing information into a coherent whole. Additionally, she was committed to making all class assignments work toward cultural transformation inside and outside the school. Unfortunately, some families balked at the “heavy” and “sickening” research topics. Both Teacher Tanya and Principal Maria persisted in their commitment but tried to appease offended families by offering an alternative assignment for those students. However, a directive from the “central office” derailed their efforts.

For Principals Linda and Gertrude, fundamentally rooted in cultural understanding, their persistence to advance their school communities’ levels of understanding about educational inequities was through initiatives they implemented to raise awareness and address these issues. In discussing the kind of impact they wanted to have on the academic and professional lives of students and teachers, they expressed a belief in restructuring school programs into new designs to support their students’ learning and professional communities. Both principals placed a general emphasis on providing support programs or structures to assist students with their academic goals, educational planning (such as individualized student development plans and graduation plans), and instructional leadership practices (i.e. study groups, monthly and quarterly progress reports, and extended day tutoring).

Principal Gertrude focused her efforts on developing educational programs that attracted and retained students. She provided more instructional time and development programs for low-performing students. Programs to help students succeed included “Saturday for Success,” a two-hour Saturday program for students who have less than a C average, academic lunchtime for students who needed individualized instruction from the principal and assistant principal, and after-school tutoring. Gertrude articulated the importance of fostering high academic achievement for all students by rewarding students (academic lunch bunch), recognizing higher

achievers with an “academic bowl” (all subject- area preparation for ACTs), and presenting a letter jacket (indication of school pride) at school assemblies to motivate students.

Echoing a similar sentiment, Principal Linda evidenced an equity focus for all students in her efforts to provide diverse student group clubs to reflect her study body, regardless of the size of individual groups. Linda spoke of the different student groups that were present in her school (e.g. Black Student Association, Latino group, Native American group, LGBT group, Straight Alliance group, etc.) and proudly affirmed, “We want kids to join different groups and integrate into these groups ... our students need to have an identity and have outlets where they can personalize how they feel.” This was a demonstration of her ethic of care toward students, a critical dimension of her transformative leadership style.

Discussion

The women in this study served as exemplars for how school leaders can engage in courageous conversations to transform beliefs and practices concerning educational inequities and enhance learning for all students. Both formal and informal leaders in this QSA study were guided by personal convictions, commitment, and considered action to attain goals for equitable schools. They did not rest on the rhetoric of their values and beliefs, but expended considerable strategic and practical energy toward the realization of their vision for achieving educational equity (Jean-Marie, 2008, 2009; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Singleton & Linton, 2006). This was true for all the school leaders in this study whether they originated from a place of privilege or oppression. The findings bring focus to two important areas on schools can more rigorously address systemic inequities and promote an environment that is support of all learners.

Using school data to understand and improve school conditions and student learning

Whether emanating from personal marginalizing experiences and/or unflinching recognition of inequities, some of the school leaders articulated their commitment to facilitating equitable outcomes for students was directly connected to professional accountability (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). They used their school data not only for assessing academic performance but also understanding school conditions that enhanced or impeded students’ learning experience. They were exceptionally conscientious of not only their accountability to affect change for their students’ lives, but they were highly aware of the bottom line in terms of test scores. Their beliefs in and commitment to quality education was more than a motto; it was realized in the experiences they provided for students. Their commitment to students, while centered on caring, also dovetailed with the political climate of their contexts: They worked within their political realities of high-stakes testing and were tenacious in their efforts to help their students survive and thrive within the neoliberal accountability climate.

Further, their interest in students’ success began with developing an authentic relationship between themselves as school leaders and their students (Bascia & Young 2001; Furman & Starratt 2002; Jean-Marie, 2008, 2009). The school leaders also played a significant role in improving access and opportunity for children historically marginalized by mainstream public schooling (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Jean-Marie, 2008, 2009; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). They led with purpose, knowledge, courage, and commitment in the midst of

increased accountability and high-stakes testing. Energized to change the conditions of students' learning, the three principals and the teacher – by chronicling how stewards of educational equity can lead in their school communities – provide a snapshot of the kind of transformative leadership needed in the twenty-first century. The work of school leaders is vital for improvement of educational practices to close historic achievement gaps in every school and district across the United States (Skrla et al., 2004).

Educational leaders addressing student identities to eradicate systemic inequities

Similar to how school leaders in the study practiced leadership that was attentive to identity intersectionality markers, leaders should bring focus to school members (i.e. teachers, staff, and administrators) the realities of students' lives and the ways their practices create marginalizing conditions. Every school member plays an essential role to improve the quality of school learning and experience for students that is focused on addressing systemic inequities (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Jansen, 2008). But effective leadership (i.e. transformative: Shields, 2010 and applied critical leadership: Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012) is critical to such processes. Effective school leaders have an awareness of broad social and cultural realities of students and their schooling experiences (Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Jean-Marie, 2008; Lyman et al. 2005).

Moreover, the ways the intersection of student identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) form the contextual backdrop for societal inequities must be readily recognized. Beyond an awareness of contextual factors and the importance of identities, effective leaders assess how policies and practices may be marginalizing students as they pertain to issues of race and other markers of difference (Dantley & Tillman, 2009). School leaders should soberly ponder the ways students are socialized in the school setting. As evident in the study, school leaders concerned with educational inequities should interrogate discipline policies as well as investigate how various educational practices such as tracking and induction to gifted or other special education programs are accomplished and how they might impact student populations differently according to identity complexities (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Jean-Marie, 2008, 2009; Singleton & Linton, 2006). They are positioned to create a school climate of openness and intellectual rigor, and help teachers develop strategies for closing the achievement gap between the 'haves and have not' (Brooks & Miles, 2008; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Jean-Marie, 2008, 2009; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Conclusion and implications

At a time when the US rapidly shifting demographics are increasingly diverse and changing the social landscape of schools, courageous school leaders are needed the most to embrace and support the increasing levels of diversity in K-12 schools. Leadership that is transformative (Shields, 2010), which draws upon applied critical leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012) and advances educational equity (Jean-Marie, 2005, 2009; Theoharis, 2007), are vital to eradicating the vestiges of inequities that persist. School leaders can draw on context specific issues directly involving their schools by focusing efforts to identify patterns of marginalization based on race/ethnicity, gender, class, etc. However, in order for school leaders to robustly develop capacity to address educational inequities, such an effort should begin with raising the critical consciousness of school members.

At times, this may involve school leaders turning the mirror inward (Black & Murtadha, 2007) to reflect on their beliefs and practices that may perpetuate inequities along race/ethnicity and other forms of biases such as gender or sexual orientation. They also have to be willing to engage conversations with school members, internally and externally on practices that are systematically creating the gap between the “haves and have nots.” Reflecting and becoming more consciously aware may lead to places of discomfort but it also gives them an opportunity to understand the intricacies of racial discrimination, biases, inequities, etc. Further, school leaders can challenge others only to the extent they change their own beliefs and practices. In addressing issues of race in schooling, school leaders’ heightened awareness of institutional racism is important in order to effectively create a school climate of openness and intellectual rigor (Jean-Marie, 2009) and develop strategies for closing the achievement gap (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Finally, a broader implication of this QSA study pertains to leadership preparation programs: higher education must prepare leaders to have courageous conversations about educational inequities! Practicing these skills in the university classroom and through field-based experiences provide aspiring leaders opportunities to engage, share, and test their ideas (Jean-Marie, 2009). How can we prepare our students to face this difficult task in the real world (not just theoretical)? Recent efforts supported by the University Council of Educational Administration and US Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant are bringing together through a cadre of universities in partnership with the Southern Poverty Law Center to develop curriculum modules to prepare school leaders to support the learning and development of diverse learners. These modules include accessible, powerful learning experiences in the areas of racial awareness, advocacy, data use, parent and community engagement, leadership for English language learners, and problem resolving. Such initiatives at the institutional and national level, show promise to more coherently engage faculty on integrating these modules in existing courses offered in building-level educational leadership preparation to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Notes on contributors

Katherine Cumings Mansfield (PhD, The University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor of Leadership and Policy at Virginia Commonwealth University. Mansfield is a first-generation college graduate who studies issues of educational and vocational access and achievement as they relate to identity intersectionalities such as gender, class, religion, race, and place. Mansfield is published in a variety of venues including: *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, and *Journal of School Leadership*.

Gaëtane Jean-Marie is a professor and chair of the Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Human Resource Education at the University of Louisville (KY, USA). Jean-Marie is an award-winning teacher and researcher, and the author of numerous books and articles. Jean-Marie is the editor of the *Journal of School Leadership* and serves on the Editorial Review Boards of *Journal of Educational Administration* and *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*.

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