

A Distributed Leadership Perspective for Critical Consciousness in Middle Grades

Kenneth M. Bond, *University of Wisconsin-Madison*
Daniel P. Tulino, *Stockton University*

Introduction

As the current social climate seems to create new opportunities – as well as new resistances – to engaging in work focused on equity, educational leaders are faced with balancing a growing array of expectations. In middle grades settings, this is particularly salient because middle grades students are cultivating critical consciousness to apply general knowledge of equity issues to their local context(s) (Nojan, 2020). As educators work to foster environments that allow middle grade students to cultivate and develop critical consciousness, expectations have shifted in the area of leading for equity. Topics related to equity were considered “non-discussables” in public forums by many in educational leadership in the early 2000s (Barth, 2002). In our current climate, there is now a public expectation that educational leaders successfully and publicly address areas of equity in highly polarized environments. Arundel (2020) reported that, “Although nearly 90% of school superintendents said conversations about race and equity are either extremely or very important, only 21% said they were ‘very well prepared’ for that responsibility” (p. 1). We (the authors) are two well-seasoned educators, one with teaching and administrative experiences in the field of policy and multilingual learners and the other in the field of urban secondary education. When we talk to our network of middle grades educational leaders who do feel “very well prepared” for equity conversations, they often share that they feel so engaged with their administrative duties that they are unable to prioritize equity to the extent that they wish they could. During a regular meeting time we established, we were discussing the difficulty educational leaders had navigating this area. As we started to synthesize theories we were engaging with in personal scholarship, we co-developed the Distributed Critical Consciousness Actions for Educational Leaders which is described in this article.

Critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996) is the connection between critically analyzing the social world and taking action to disrupt systems that create and perpetuate issues of inequity, oppression, and injustice. In the field of

education, many studies of critical consciousness have focused primarily on students and preservice teachers (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017; Gay & Kirkland, 2003). With this article, we shift the focus from critical consciousness for students to the advancement of critical consciousness for educational leaders. Through the continuous process of reflection and action, leaders can lead for equity through the advancement of critical consciousness. To be successful, critical consciousness cannot be limited to only the formal leaders in a district or school. Utilizing a distributed leadership perspective, leaders must co-construct an environment for equity in which critical consciousness is cultivated for all.

In this article, we are presenting an evidenced-informed, theoretical framework that is a synthesis of selected scholarship on distributed leadership and critical consciousness. The purpose of this framework is two-fold. First, it is intended to provide practical insights to educational leaders as they work to develop distributed critical consciousness that is adaptive to the myriad pressures in their context. Second, it can inform the work of stakeholders (students, families, community members, staff, outside organizations, etc.) as they work with educational leaders to build a shared sense of critical consciousness and sociopolitical action in the classrooms, districts, and the wider community.

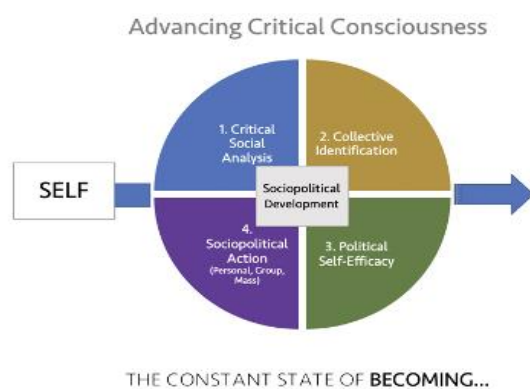
Advancement of Critical Consciousness

The ideologies that inform critical consciousness have played a crucial role in shaping the progressions of education throughout the 20th century (DuBois, 1903/1999; Freire, 1970/1996; hooks, 1994). Being aware of oneself and society (hooks, 1982) is the first step in developing what Freire described as “conscientização.” This framing hinges on two key ideas: critically examining the self and society and taking action to disrupt social injustices. To better understand biases created through social norms and their own *mis*-education (Woodson, 1933/1998), educational leaders must investigate and interrogate their own positions and place in the

world. Watts, Williams, and Jager (1999) presented a theory of sociopolitical development (SPD) centering the “African American struggle for social justice and its spiritual underpinnings” (p. 256). SPD is built upon Freire’s concept of critical consciousness. Specifically, SPD is the psychological process that leads to and supports social and political action (p. 256). As leaders begin to develop critical consciousness, issues of racism, sexism, classism, etc. will come into greater focus. By reflecting on this newly gained perspective, they can begin to view the world through a newly constructed lens. Through this lens, leaders can no longer look past the impact of racism and persistent inequities in schools. The advancement of an individual’s critical consciousness, as theorized by Watts and Hipilito-Delgado (2015), was applied to students in all school settings and relied on four key elements: Critical social analysis, collective identification, political self-efficacy, and sociopolitical action. Figure 1 represents the framework for how we envision school leaders can engage in not only advancing their own critical consciousness but that of an entire school ecosystem. By engaging in the ongoing development of critical consciousness, individuals work together to build a collective consciousness that further equity in schools.

Figure 1

Advancing Critical Consciousness



A Distributed Leadership Perspective for Critical Consciousness

We define a distributed leadership lens as the viewing of a task through the sum of the influences applied during related interactions making up that task. A task could be any action taken to achieve a goal in the context of an educational community. Using this lens

“expands our attention beyond the actions of individual leaders to their interactions with others that lead to the joint activity that underlies virtually all leadership energy in schools” (Supovitz et al., 2019, p. 9). In the context of a school, “leadership energy” does not fit neatly into an organizational chart. It is seated within all of the ways individuals exert their influence during the many activities that make up a task. Supovitz et al. suggest five elements for leaders who want to take an expanded, distributed-leadership perspective.

1. Recognizing, positioning, and utilizing resources for (formal/informal) leadership.
2. Developing a set of leadership skills that emphasize enacting influence rather than relying largely on authority.
3. Using leadership skills to craft a set of organizational conditions that encourage the engagement that produces improvement.
4. Involving a broader array of stakeholders as leaders in the continuous improvement process.
5. Navigating the challenges associated with distributed leadership for meaningful and sustainable school improvement. (p. 9)

Leaders who advance critical consciousness are able to co-construct educational environments alongside their stakeholders and constituents that promote mutualism. This allows the school community to enter cycles of reflection and action to work together for social justice.

Implementational and Ideological Spaces

Cultivating critical consciousness in “sensitive and often volatile” equity contexts (Sampson, n.d.) presents unique challenges that cannot be addressed by a distributed leadership lens alone. We recommend that educational leaders utilize the policy spaces in their context to create change as they approach equitable outcomes through a distributed leadership lens. They need to determine the implementational and ideological spaces (Hornberger, 2003; Hornberger, 2005) they can open for distributed critical consciousness. Educational communities are complex environments. When navigating the policies (written and defacto) and politics of a school or district, educational leaders must look at the implementational and ideological spaces (Hornberger, 2003; Hornberger, 2005) that are

available in their context. While implementational and ideological spaces were originally applied to educational language policy, they have broad implications for educational leadership. Implementational spaces (Hornberger) are ambiguous spaces within policy. These spaces are created when written policies, procedures, or laws are left vague or open to interpretation. Hornberger described ideological spaces as the prevailing assumptions of those in power. When educational leaders are looking to start a project to enhance distributed critical consciousness, they should consider the current policy landscape and what can bolster their ability to advocate for their project. When working towards distributed critical consciousness, leaders need to consider the ideologies of politics and policy influencers in their sphere. Leaders then must craft messages and strategies that allow them to gain traction by emphasizing the ways that distributed critical consciousness aligns with the prevailing assumptions of those influencers.

An example that we are aware of from our personal experience is that of a leader who leveraged implementational and ideological spaces to define equity. An equity policy was up for re-adoption with the board of education, so they utilized this implementational space to introduce a new definition of equity that would give them a foundation for equity-related, distributed critical consciousness actions. When they proposed the new definition, some board members became vocal in their opposition to the change, including calling the definition “Marxist”. This educational leader knew that these board members were ideologically aligned with anti critical race theory legislation. Although they did not agree with this legislation, to open up ideological spaces, the educational leader inserted some vocabulary from the anti critical race theory legislation into the definition. They felt that the wording changes were benign and would not impact the essence of the equity definition. After the revision was made, all board members started to support this new definition and the policy was adopted. Utilizing these implementational and ideological spaces then opened up opportunities for distributed critical consciousness actions for this educational leader.

Distributed Critical Consciousness Actions for Educational Leaders

We have developed a new theoretical framework titled “Distributed Critical Consciousness Actions for Educational Leaders” by synthesizing the elements we have summarized, including the “elements to advance critical consciousness” (Watts & Hipilito-Delgado, 2015) and the “five distributed-leadership elements” (Supovitz et al., 2019). Our definitions for each of the “elements to advance critical consciousness” have been created specifically with educational leaders in mind, and each example demonstrates how the elements can be applied at the middle-grades level.

1. Critical social analysis –

Educational leaders collaborate with stakeholders (including students) to develop a climate of curiosity that allows for the collective leveraging of resources (time, money, staffing, etc.) to meaningfully explore the societal factors that marginalize and oppress the communities in their catchment(s).

Example: A superintendent funds a youth participatory action research after-school club to research an issue of equity in the community. The eighth-grade club decides to investigate the desegregation and subsequent re-segregation of the school district in the 1970s, as well as the current-day impact of this history on the community. Students utilize newspaper archives at a nearby university library as well as interviews with former students who experienced this firsthand. Students create a short documentary which they screen for the board of education which is followed by a student-led, school-wide “watch party.” The content of this student-led investigation is then integrated into a unit focused on the civil-rights era and current social-justice issues.

2. Collective identification –

Educational leaders create an atmosphere where all stakeholders (including students) identify collectively as a community that emphasizes and studies the ways in which individual members and member groups of the community are marginalized and oppressed.

Example: A middle-school principal forms a committee of students, staff, and community members to select one of five autobiographies for “One Book One School.” The autobiographies are written by authors from marginalized/oppressed groups. The selected texts highlight the struggle and agency of authors as they navigate oppressive systems and overcome discriminatory policies through their organization against injustice. During the school year, the school community reads the selected book and promotes collaborative learning through town hall meetings, discussions during professional learning communities (PLCs), and integration into language arts units. The principal then facilitates meetings in which the school-level data committee works with the school’s student voice committee to investigate disproportionality in disciplinary outcomes and how discriminatory policies/practices impact disciplinary outcomes.

3. **Political self-efficacy** – Educational leaders leverage their political capital to stand in solidarity with communities that are marginalized and oppressed so that individual stakeholders feel empowered to leverage their bodies of knowledge, experiences, and voices for change.

Example: After an incident of police brutality against a Black man in the county where the school district is located, the head of school drafts a statement of solidarity with the Black community in their district. They then facilitate a convening of a group of student, staff, and community activists to discuss and revise the statement. Next, they work with students to identify an outside partner who can help mobilize student responses through art and lead whole-school conversations about the incident. This culminates in the head of school developing an agenda item for a board of education meeting during which student representatives discuss the personal impact of the incident and what it should mean for how schooling happens in the district.

4. **Sociopolitical action** – Educational leaders leverage the formal and informal political structures to allow stakeholders to organize for collective change that (as they see it) affirms the rights of the marginalized and oppressed of the school community.

Example: School-based leaders collaborate with teachers to create a social justice summer reading program to foster the inclusion of texts designed to promote diversity and inclusion of multiple perspectives in literature. Texts representing authors from various racial, ethnic, linguistic, and LGBTQ+ backgrounds are highlighted throughout the suggested reading list while the content in the texts challenges traditional ways of knowing and being. Students who engage with this initiative and complete the suggested reading list are visited by one of the district educational leaders and presented with a certificate of recognition showcasing the student’s commitment to reading for social change.

Conclusion

Although critical consciousness may seem to be a theoretical abstract for many educational leaders, this concept is at the center of equity and social-justice work in middle grades and beyond. We acknowledge there is a need to implement this work and build evidence to study the utility of this framework in a school and/or district setting. We have outlined a leadership framework we believe will advance the collective critical consciousness with examples for middle-grade contexts. Our focus is working toward equitable outcomes through one’s sociopolitical development and creating ways to further the collective critical consciousness of the entire school community through a distributed leadership perspective. One area for future research is how to iteratively refine the framework based on its use with various leaders. We believe that refinement could come from piloting the framework with a range of future administrators during the coaching and mentorship that is part of their certification programs. Our hope is that through this framework educational leaders will develop their critical consciousness in the context of their priorities as well as work towards a shared sense of critical consciousness and sociopolitical action

in classrooms, schools, districts, and the wider community.

References

- Arundel, K. (2020). Most superintendents say they're not 'very well prepared' to lead race, equity conversations. *K-12 Dive*. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/superintendents-not-ready-to-lead-race-conversations/587717/>
- Barth, R. (2002). The culture builder. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 6-11.
- Cherry-McDaniel, M. #WOKE: Employing Black textualities to create critically conscious classrooms. *English Journal* 106(4), 41-46.
- Dubois, W.E.B. (1903/1999). *The souls of Black folk*. A. C. McClurg and Co.
- Freire, P. (1970/1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Gay, G., & Kirkland, K.N. (2003). Developing cultural critical consciousness and self-reflection in preservice teacher education. *Theory into Practice*, 42(3).
- hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge Press.
- Nojan, S. (2020). Why ethnic studies? Building critical consciousness among middle school students. *Middle School Journal*, 51(2), 25-35.
- Sampson, C. (n.d.). *In school boards we trust? The potential for educational equity in public education*. Stanford University Equity Alliance.
- Supovitz, J.A., D'Auria, J., & Spillane, J.P. (2019). Meaningful & sustainable school improvement with distributed leadership.
- Watts, R.J., Griffith, D.M., & Abdul-Adil, J. (1999). Sociopolitical development as an antidote for oppression—Theory and action. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27(2), 255–271.
- Watts, R.J., Williams, N.C., & Jagers, R.J. (2003). Sociopolitical development. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(1/2), 185-194.
- Watts, R.J., & Hipolito-Delgado, C.P. (2015). Thinking ourselves to liberation?: Advancing sociopolitical action in critical consciousness. *The Urban Review*, 47(5), 847-867.
- Woodson, C.G. (1933/1998). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Africa World Press.