

When Leaders Collaborate: Transformative Leadership for Rural Development in Trinidad and Tobago

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Despite official decolonization in 1962, practices in Trinidad and Tobago still reflect highly colonial ideologies and governance that often lead to the perpetuation of discrimination, inequity, and domination. The country's 1,376,494 citizenry (Worldometres, 2019) comprises Indigenous, Spanish, French, British, African, East Indian, Chinese, and other European decedents. The national motto "Together we aspire, together we achieve," expresses unity for a diverse citizenry. However, this impression of unity and equity does not always parallel reality. Many citizens experience systemic injustices and inequalities related to ethnicity, social and economic status, location, gender, and sexual orientation.

This paper highlights factors that negatively affect rural education in Trinidad and Tobago. Building upon the philosophies of Shields (2018) and Freire (2002), Transformative Leadership is promoted as a from-the-ground-up leadership style that can address social justice and equity in Trinidad and Tobago. Specifically, this paper explores extents to which rural educators and community members may adopt transformative leadership approaches in promoting equity and just treatment of country's rural population. To achieve this objective, rural challenges are first explored. Next, transformative leadership is proposed as an effective leadership style appropriate for addressing rural education dilemmas. Thirdly, the principles of transformative leadership are adapted to encompass

effective leadership attributes among rural residents. Finally, anticipated outcomes are explored as consequences of collaboration among transformative leaders in rural schools and communities.

Although this paper focuses on issues local to Trinidad and Tobago, there is a strong reliance on international literature. The rationales for such structure are: 1) there is limited literature that explores or compares rural vs urban education or rural community development in Trinidad and Tobago, 2) issues highlighted in this paper are not unique to Trinidad and Tobago but are international in scope, and 3) Trinidad and Tobago's education is greatly impacted by global practices and demands. This format provides the potential to examine rural dilemmas in Trinidad and Tobago and propose remedies as they relate to a wider international scope. My position as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, rural community member, and rural educator places me in an ideal position to examine rural issues from an insider's standpoint, thus creating a realistic depiction of rurality and rural education based on personal experiences and backed by theoretical assertions.

The Rural Dilemma

Inequity is quite prevalent in the experiences of Trinidad and Tobago's 37% rural citizenry. Perceptions of the country's prosperity may lead to the misconception that Trinidad and Tobago's wealth, resources, and opportunities for growth are equitably distributed among its citizens. Contrary to these notions, Rajack-Talley (2016), De Lisle, Smith, Keller, and Julesa (2012), UNICEF (2017), and Brown and Conrad (2007) expressed concern over the underdevelopment, unemployment, and poverty that are often more prominent in the country's rural areas than urban. As Trinidad and Tobago continues to experience urban expansion and investment, rural areas are forced to function with limited amenities and resource allocation (De Lisle, Seecharan, & Aydikey, 2010). This

inequitable allocation of resources benefits urban areas while impinging on rural development.

One area of great disparity experienced by rural communities is in the provision of education that aims toward rural development. De Lisle and his colleagues (2010) described Trinidad and Tobago's education system as an embodiment of inequity. Campbell (1996) explained that from the inception of formal public education, rural communities were subjected to poor facilities, un/underqualified teachers, and low student attendance. Poor roads and inadequate transportation prevent rural students and teachers from reaching schools in adverse weather. Dr. Eric Williams—the country's first prime minister—acknowledged similar rural neglect in his 1946 article entitled "Education in the British West Indies." He expressed concern toward the country's colonial practices that resulted in rural neglect and declared education as a means of empowerment. During his 18 years in office—until his death in 1981—William's ideologies influenced many post-independent initiatives where education became a pioneer for rural development.

After 57 years of independence, rural residents in Trinidad and Tobago still receive substandard educational opportunities and access. One major reason for this predicament can be attributed to the national focus on neoliberalization, globalization, and capitalism that often supersede rural development. The industrial and economic emphasis—which highly attend to urban-oriented development—lead to uneven distribution of resources and funds, resulting in a lack of development of rural schools (De Lisle et al., 2010). Furthermore, universities, vocational schools, and other post-secondary institutions are concentrated in urban areas making it problematic for rural students to gain equal opportunities to post-secondary education.

Even more disturbing are the nation's education policies and standards that usually attend to urban requirements without taking into consideration the issues and needs of rural schools and their communities. Rural schools are mandated to follow urban-centric curricula that seldom cater to rural residents' needs and aspirations. Instead, these strict directives further exacerbate rural challenges as these communities' educational requirements are placed on a metaphoric back-burner to urban and global interests. Several scholars have highlighted the negative impacts similar bureaucratic emphasis have on rural development. McHenry-Sorber and Schafft (2015) and Corbett (2010) critiqued trends of globalization and industrialization that have resulted in significant changes in rural communities as they now experience huge out-migration of their most able and skilled workforce—or what Carr & Kefalas (2009) dubbed brain drain. Julien (2013) composed an article entitled "Rural-Urban migration in Trinidad—my experience" where she shared her experiences as a rural resident. She highlighted ways in which inadequate opportunities forced her to relocate to urban communities in pursuit of a career, leaving behind connections to family and place. As such, national urban-centric educational focus results in rural community members both willingly and reluctantly leaving their homes in the hope of gaining better employment or education opportunities, thus, depriving these communities of their valuable human resources.

Transformative Leadership for Rural Schools

Rural schools are major driving forces in the fight against the struggles that rural communities face. They are the main institutions where students learn to value their uniqueness and those of others. As Shields (2018) maintained, there is no specific remedy to strengthen education in ways that cater to students' diverse backgrounds. The complexities of rural education create a unique

quandary for leaders. However, promoting leadership qualities that focus on equitable and just exposure to educational opportunities and respect for diversity is a step toward strengthening education for diversity (Carr, 2011; Shields, 2018). Transformative leadership attends to these issues as it echoes the leadership qualities inspired by Paulo Freire and pioneered by Carolyn Shields. It encompasses the philosophies of Burns (1978) who supported the need for alteration of traditional leadership practices to focus on transforming systems via relationship building, vision creating, and motivating. Transformative leadership includes Burns' philosophies but goes further to embrace a commitment to recognizing and addressing issues of inequity and injustice. Principles such as integrity, justice, fairness, equity for all, and respect for human rights and differences have been supported by many of Trinidad and Tobago's social justice advocates (Cudjoe, 2011; De Lisle et al., 2012). Transformative leaders address these principles by adhering to the eight tenets of transformative leadership presented by Shields (2011).

The tenants for transformative leadership—as proposed by Shields (2018)—are:

1. Deep and equitable change. This tenant emphasizes the need for discourse aimed at identifying practices that knowingly or unknowingly marginalize or discriminate.
2. The necessity of new knowledge frameworks. This tenant involves determining how to proceed in making changes to negative issues recognized in tenant one.
3. Address the inequitable distribution of power. This tenant addresses issues that surround groups that are small in number but hold dominant voice in decision making (e.g. the rich, policymakers, supervisors, and principal).
4. Balancing private and public good. This tenet focuses on the purpose of education where private good is described as

outcomes that enhance individual competence and caters to personal goals; whereas, public good focuses on the ability of persons to contribute to society.

5. A focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice. This tenet highlights the need for educators and educational leaders to work toward creating inclusive and democratic educational environments.
6. An emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness and global awareness. This tenet promotes the inclusion of social-justice in school curricula.
7. Balance critique and promise. This tenet emphasizes the importance of leaders embarking on courageous critique of current practices.
8. Exhibit moral courage. This last tenet challenges leaders to understand and exemplify moral courage to stand up against the practices that discriminate and marginalize.

Carr (2011) suggested that transformative leadership practices should be adopted by various educational stakeholders including principals, vice-principals, teachers, senior-level officials, parents, and members in community interest groups. With transformative leadership as an overarching leadership principle, stakeholders can be encouraged to work toward common objectives (Blackmore, 2011). In so doing, leaders in Trinidad and Tobago can strive toward achieving common education goals, individual growth and economic opportunities, and reduce inequities.

One major role of transformative education leaders is to help rural communities clarify the kind of schools and education they want and value. Such leaders are charged with the responsibility of encouraging dialogue aimed at understanding local realities and what rural communities deem relevant and important to their development. bell hooks (1994) maintained that vital knowledge is acquired when marginalized people are allowed to speak. Freire

(2002) also endorsed the notion that the best persons to explain situations and challenges are the people actually experiencing the challenges. Both Freire and hooks, along with Brown and Conrad (2007), emphasized the need for educational leaders to link school and community. In so doing, greater understandings and respect for communities' culture, beliefs, and hopes can be accomplished.

Transformative leaders, for rural schools, value their ability to work toward empowering students and, by extension, rural communities. In so doing, such leaders are encouraged to promote a comprehensive rather than narrow curriculum. This is especially vital for rural students who require more opportunities to find areas of strength and possibilities for learning (Blackmore, 2011). Such leaders also incorporate social justice education into their school praxis and can courageously challenge the status quo by bringing issues affecting rural education to the forefront and remaining proactive in working toward alleviating education challenges.

Leaders Among Rural Community Members

The success of rural development heavily depends on the involvement of leaders within the communities. These leaders stand in solidarity in the fight for transformation (Freire, 2002; Rami, Abdulla, & Ibrahim, 2016). I chose to combine the characteristics of "revolutionary leaders" (Freire, 2002) and "transformative leaders" (Shields, 2018) to describe a leadership style that may be suitable for community members working toward social justice and equity. In Trinidad and Tobago, the term "community leaders" is frequently associated with members of communities who are involved in illegal activities such as drug trafficking and other gang-related activities. They are perceived to have great influence on the practices of some members (mostly young men) of their community. Because of this local label, I prefer to use the term transformative revolutionary leaders when referring to rural community leaders.

The word “revolution” does not reflect dominance nor violence. Freire (2002) condemns revolutionary praxis that involves components of manipulation, regimentation, force, and/or deceit. Instead, he promotes revolutionary leaders as those engaging in courageous dialogue. Such dialogue is integral to overcoming marginalization and engaging in transformation (Freire, 2002, 2014; Shields, 2004, 2018).

Transformative revolutionary leaders’ responsibility lies in ensuring that education reflects the vision of the community and not that of dominant groups’ interest. They stand in solidarity with their community members to insist that schools be reformed to cater to the needs of their community (Freire, 2014). Such leaders participate in community programs that are aligned with the aspirations and needs of the community (Rami et al., 2016). They do not see themselves as fighting for the people, but rather fighting in solidarity with the people. These attributes concur with the theories of Shields (2004) and Freire (2002) and are essential to leaders’ success.

When Transformative Leaders Collaborate

The establishment of links, which serves as an integral component in strengthening struggles due to rural inequity, is effective when these linkages bring together transformative rural and revolutionary leaders. The strength is greater when leaders of both rural communities and schools form alliances and stand in solidarity against inequity in rural education. Community members and educators must form a reciprocal working relationship with a willingness to understand the circumstances and their roles in the transformation toward social justice and equity for their schools and communities. Courageous communication between rural education leaders and revolutionary leaders must occur as these collaborations empower both parties by capitalizing on their strengths. Strong

school-community partnerships also encourage students to become part of the quest for change. Students become important contributors to the implementation of initiatives that address the challenges of marginalization (Schafft, 2016). Rural educators, students, and community members can then have the opportunity to work together on initiatives that build connections and promote transformation toward a more just and equitable society.

Advocating for social justice, equity, and inclusion is not an easy task (Ryan, 2006). The inception of relationships fostered under the guidance of transformative leaders of both schools and communities must be fostered by hope (Freire, 1994). This hope, as described by Freire (1994), leads the marginalized to believe that there is the possibility of a different future. Dialogue cannot take place without hope, and it is through this dialogue that transformation is initiated (Freire, 2002).

Implications

The government of Trinidad and Tobago has acknowledged the presence of disparities in its education system in the Ministry of Education's Draft Education Policy Paper 2017-2022. Actions toward reform must proceed acknowledgment of disparities. Over forty years ago, Bennis (1984)—one of the early advocates of transformative education—contended that leaders for transformation must not be concerned with “doing things right but with doing the right thing” (p. 66). Therefore, now that persons with decision-making power have identified disparities, they should act on alleviating these inequalities. They should pay attention to structuring policies that foster equity and in so doing strike an equitable and just balance between rural-urban education opportunities and community development. They must embrace transformative leadership values in the quest to ensuring just and equitable opportunities to all citizens.

Identity is unique, and all persons should be acknowledged and respected regardless of ethnicity, social status, sex or sexual orientation, or geographic location. Rural citizens of Trinidad and Tobago should not lose pride in their identity due to the negative and unjust treatment geared toward them. Transformative leaders within both rural communities and schools must emerge among all rural segments of Trinidad and Tobago and stand in solidarity for the end of injustice and inequity in education that disadvantage rural communities. By so doing, Freire's (2014) dream of just societies, where knowledge is encouraged without discrimination can be realized.

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