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Courageous school board: Critical consciousness and excellence

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ABSTRACT

In a politically divided country, school board work has become extremely difficult. In this article, we argue Paulo Freire's theory of critical consciousness is both relevant and informative for current and future school board members. This article describes how critical consciousness can be applied to the pressing work of school boards to ensure equity and excellence for communities and schools.

Context and introduction

Educational systems are powerful institutions that can arrest or advance the progress of society (Dunn, 2022). Local law endows school board officials with the authority to expand or limit students' academic opportunities. They can strengthen or weaken democracy, resist or advance racial bias, and arrest or promote academic and social inequities. The values and perceptions of school board members can shape students' future social progress and economic status (Barro & Lee, 1996). "Meanwhile, the history of public schooling is no more than an archive of policies, practices, and practical examples where racial and social inequities are procreated" (Abdul Rahman, 2022, p. 2). White-only school boards and inequitable school leadership have been an affixed feature of public schooling (Ramsey, 2017). This inherent tension continues to challenge the US public school system's ability to provide Black students equal treatment (Dumas, 2016; Wun, 2016). Using Freire (1974) as a guide, we propose a framework of conscientization to enable school board members to transform schools and school boards.

Problem statement

The United States has 13,318 public school districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Collectively, they educate approximately 49.4 million students (Irwin et al., 2022). Although school boards are established fixtures of America's public school system, legislators, policy makers, and advocates continue to debate the effectiveness and efficacy of school boards.

Throughout the last century, public disapproval with local school boards rapidly gained steam. Dissatisfaction with school boards began during the 1970s (Alsbury, 2004; Danzberger et al., 1992; Sewall, 1996). In 1983, the release of the report, *A Nation at Risk*,

by the National Commission on Excellence in Education presented a portrait of a US public school system in serious jeopardy (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Since then, school board elections that were once uncontested have drawn the interest of voters (Bullock, 2015; Naverrette, 2017; Penner, 1990). More recently, school board elections nationwide have drawn the attention of public legislators and their respective political parties. Conflicts among school board members are heavily scrutinized and covered by the media (Ballotpedia, 2022; Sawchuk, 2021). School board elections draw slates of candidates galvanized by one issue or another, where members draw support by espousing social issues that are often unrelated to school governance (Sawchuk, 2021). Board members frustrate the community by refusing to address important issues of equity (Burtch & Gordon, 2021; Dunn, 2022; Miller et al., 2022). Meanwhile, reading and writing on grade level remains a challenge for many public-school students (MacGillis, 2023; Nation's Report Card, 2023).

School board members must be stewards of their school districts, safeguarding the best interest of students while deliberately building an equitable future for their communities. They should be trustees willing to call attention to the most pressing issues that challenge their school communities (Reed, 2023), especially those issues that have been historically ignored. When appropriate, school board members also must assume the role of delegates (Reed, 2023). They must be willing to work for the people (school community and the larger community) to tackle the most pressing problems related to equity and excellence in public schools. Critical consciousness can support more equitable and successful schools through sharing awareness of structural racism and issues of inequity (Palmer et al., 2019). In this article, we propose a framework for board members to use critical consciousness to drive the change that is needed for an equitable and more successful US public school system.

Method: Conscientization as a framework for school boards

Conscientization describes the ways in which individuals and communities develop an informed understanding of their collective social reality (Freire, 1974). It is a deliberate learning cycle that moves individuals and society to full humanity. According to Freire (1998), transformational learning that targets social change transforms society. Conscientization relates to the ability to achieve authentic understanding and taking active action based on a deeper and more informed understanding of the past that created our present conditions.

Conscientization is the cognitive process where individuals move from passive understanding of oneself, others, and the world to a more critical understanding of the history that created the conditions experienced today. This process allows individuals and society to shed old thinking where reality is partial, compartmentalized, and segmented to gain a comprehensive view of reality and its relationship and connectedness to the past. The philosophical underpinning of the theory of conscientization is Freire's belief (1974; 1998) that humans are uniquely capable of learning, evolving and transforming themselves and the world in which they live through conscientious activities. We grow more conscientious with every conscientious activity, and with every conscientious activity performed, the consciousness of society increases (Dass, 1974).

Conscientization is a transformative learning process. It depends on a repetitive transformative cycle of reflection and action among individuals and their community

(Freire, 1974). Genuine dialogue and reflection lead to informed action that is followed with dialogue and further action — in repetition (Freire, 1998). Authentic truths and compassion transform the world by humanizing it (Freire, 1985). Compassionate consciousness allows individuals and communities to reconstruct their future path independent of the past (Dass, 1974). Transformative learning creates safe spaces where everyone involved is equally attaining knowledge and education. Conscientization is a necessary condition for social symmetry in education and in society. It eliminates the asymmetry between White students and students of color (Freire, 1994). This act of conscientious discernment allows for the constructive critique of reality and the commitment to the building of a better society (Romao & Gadotti, 2012). The equal right to an education, for example, benefits everyone within the community, which becomes an equitable place for all to live (Freire, 1994).

Theoretical application of conscientization to school board work

School board members have the power to transform lives through their influence on policy, budget, legislative advocacy, and accountability for school districts. Critical to the success of an effective school board is its willingness to embrace a compelling moral imperative to improve life outcomes for the children the board is charged to serve (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

According to Freire (1970), our current state or reality is a product of all human actions. Social change is realized by challenging social contextual structures to understand their mental and structural influences. By deconstructing society's mythical assumptions, the school board's critical consciousness is awakened (Freire, 1974). Discarding mythical reality is an ongoing, never-ending, and dynamic process. Since the 1600s, US school boards have been White majority. Thus, White school board members cannot escape their responsibility for current school conditions and system-wide failures (Dumas, 2016). Transformational learning liberates school board members from defective perceptions, exclusive assumptions, and narrow paradigms, allowing them to evolve into independent thinking individuals able to critically reflect in the pursuit of equality and democracy (Mezirow, 2000).

Through a sequential process of reflecting and acting, a cycle of consciousness is developed that enhances individual and group awareness about the institutions and practices that helped create inequity. Once the cycle of critical consciousness is adopted, school board members become proactive learners eager to gain knowledge about the systems and structures that create and sustain inequity. This increase in authentic knowledge gives the school board the agency to commit action to remove the structures that have historically sustained inequity.

A conscious school board that is continually reflecting-acting-reflecting could transform the public school system. Critically reflecting leads to understanding how systemic oppression is sustained (Watts et al., 2011). Critical motivation is the idea that these conditions can be changed, leading to a sense of efficacy and possibility (Watts et al., 2011). Finally, critical action is taken to change oppressive practices for social transformation (Diemer et al., 2016). Embracing an understanding of a holistic existence that moves beyond objectification of students based on class and color (Dumas, 2016; Wun, 2016) to critically discern students and schools as subjects humanizes students and transforms schools. However, to achieve this, school boards must be open to genuine

dialogue with the affected community, reflection leading to action, further dialogue, and further action. This simple approach to authentic learning depends on a simple repetitive transformative cycle.

Practical application of the conscientization framework to school board work

In a time in which political and racial divisions challenge a school board's capacity to effectively execute their responsibilities (Sawchuk, 2021), it is an act of courage for school board members to employ a framework of critical consciousness to their daily work. Preventing book banning, providing resources in more equitable ways, ensuring student safety, establishing key performance indicators, and hiring personnel all demonstrate a courageous school board member employing critical consciousness for more equitable outcomes for students.

Prevention of book banning

A conservative wave of right-wing, politically active school board members has initiated book banning within school districts throughout the United States (Kingkade, 2023; Reuters, 2021). Historically marginalized children have been particular targets (Dunn, 2022; Meyer et al., 2019; Reuters, 2021). The restructuring outcome of the conscientization framework — to develop a moral imperative and be transformational through the influence of a school board's power — is achieved when both the school board members and the school community authentically contemplate their realities, are empowered to reimagine their community by looking at its true needs, and collectively take action to correct systemic and historical injustices. Such injustices may be based upon issues of race, economics, and privilege. Through reflection and action, individuals and communities develop the critical understanding of their social reality (Palmer et al., 2019). Through the process of conscientization, individuals and communities take possession of reality to chart a better and more humane and equitable future.

The critically conscious board member would begin addressing this topic by first working to understand the multiple ways that systems of power create and sustain institutional racism and marginalization. As such, discussion and reflection would be sparked to look at the types of books proposed to be banned. The board member should discuss with other board members and the community the impact on students of the omission of these books from the school system. The board member would work to hear from and gain insight from historically marginalized communities, who are often frustrated by the inability of school leaders to address fear-based oppression (Meyer et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2022). Community members who feel most negatively affected by the books as well as by the banning of such books should be encouraged to speak out and should be heard. Critically conscious board members could create working groups to hear from individuals who want to express their concerns. Working groups could develop policy, working to respect those groups wanting access to content while giving families who do not want access the right to opt out, for example. The board members would work toward voting based upon the understanding of how expressed concerns would be oppressive to individuals and how to be transformative in removing such oppression for constituents.

Equitable resources and budget decisions

One of the greatest challenges for school districts is navigating the politics of distributing resources in more equitable ways. Board members and superintendents understand that the right thing to do is to prioritize the neediest students most at risk of dropping out or failure. However, Bartanen et al. (2019) reported board members typically represent wealthier, White neighborhoods, often a small but powerful force in a community. The framework of reflecting, acting, and reflecting through conscientization gives school board members the tools to question the context of one's embedded beliefs, innate feelings, assumptions and presumptions, values, and actions (Freire, 1985) and the hope and will to make a difference (Freire, 1994). Alternative perspectives will emerge. Authentic and comprehensive understanding of the past that produced the present permits individuals to form illuminated perspectives. Understanding the full spectrum of the human experience permits school board members to shed old perspectives in favor of a new and better-informed reality. A state of mind that is cognizant of the past is able to take action by developing authentic and clear responses (Freire, 1998). When individuals, schools, and society embrace the past and present to achieve full humanity, they create an equitable place for the entire community (Freire, 1985, 1994).

Board members who understand critical consciousness would subscribe to what we see happening within the Board of Education of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) in collaboration with Superintendent Tony B. Watlington. The district has boldly adopted an equity framework to force reflection related to equity as they guide their work. The questions that center their decision-making on budgetary items include the following:

- Are all stakeholder groups that are affected by the policy, practice, decision, or action at the table?
- How will the proposed policy, practice, decision, or action affect each group?
- How will the proposed policy, practice, decision, or action be perceived by each group?
- Does the policy, practice, decision, or action worsen or ignore existing disparities?
- Based on the above responses, what revisions are needed to the policy, practice, decision, or action under discussion? (School District of Philadelphia, 2023, p. 4)

This deep level of reflection prior to action can be transformative for students, particularly historically marginalized students within a school district. In Philadelphia, under the leadership of Board President Reginald Streater and Superintendent Watlington, this approach is creating a cultural shift that is requiring all leaders — central office leaders, school leaders, and business leaders — to focus and reflect in a way that centers stakeholders. In SDP, embedding the framework allows key partners like the teachers' union, administrators' union, and the service unions to discuss key stakeholder interests, empowering the board to take action based upon a shared, collective value system.

Making tough resource decisions is easier when a board is clear and committed to a moral imperative like the way SDP has prioritized equity. Leading with these equity questions at the forefront of work allows board members to hear issues from multiple perspectives to understand the impact of inequities on stakeholders as the board deliberates on critical decisions (SDP, 2023). As tough budget decisions are made, using the equity questions develops clarity around how and why funds are distributed

in more targeted ways. Thoughtfully and strategically engaging key partners will lead to a higher likelihood of surviving the political forces that strengthen and reinforce the status quo.

Student safety

Student safety, particularly after the Coronavirus 2019 pandemic, has been a priority for most board members. The pandemic highlighted existing inequities in schools (Burtch & Gordon, 2021) and the need for social emotional learning and wellness (Mayes et al., 2022). The critically conscious board member will deeply reflect upon the systems that cause safety issues, including emotional safety, wellness, and environmental safety and share such reflection with the board. For example, board members who embrace this framework would spend time understanding the historical disparities of housing patterns within their school district and would pose critical questions to seek understanding of the root causes of student housing issues related to physical, emotional, and environmental safety. Board members with critical consciousness would not be afraid to engage the community to look at the boundary patterns within their district to determine whether racial and economic lines are causing inequities in the distribution of resources and services.

With critical motivation, board members believe these conditions can be changed (Watts et al., 2011). They would have the courage to redistribute students to work to achieve more racial and socioeconomic diversity within their schools, and they would do it in a way that allows for the public discussion and diversity of perspectives with the ultimate goal of doing what is best for those students who have been historically marginalized. The critically conscious board member would be intentional and deliberate about bringing various stakeholders to the table to be educated, to understand multiple perspectives, and to center the most marginalized voices in a way that is empowering and changes the historical power structures that maintain the status quo and keep students socially, racially, and economically segregated.

Accountability and performance indicators

Schmoker (2006) pointed out that what gets measured gets done. Board members have tremendous influence over how accountable an organization is for children. The critically conscious board member understands the power of this influence to ensure all students, particularly historically marginalized students, are prioritized and are the focus of improvement work. This board member would demand data on key performance indicators be disaggregated and publicly displayed. More importantly, they would ensure that the district has concrete plans to explore root causes to underperformance, including systems of oppression that may be present within the school district or community. The critically conscious board member does not blame students and their living conditions as a reason for underperformance but has a genuine belief that children can excel if adults responsible for their education create the proper conditions for success.

Leadership is always about context, and the critically conscious leader uses data to prioritize work. They advocate for school administration to be clear about prioritizing work with measurable goals and appropriate resources that target root causes that have been deeply explored and identified. Again, this leader would understand the need and power of

bringing stakeholders to the table to guide the work that would be prioritized in a focused, intentional, results-oriented manner.

Personnel

No organization can exceed the capacity of its people (Maxwell, 2007). One of the biggest priorities for a critically conscious board member is supporting the district's vision and ensuring appropriate resources available to attract and retain a high-quality workforce that represents the diversity of the community. Critically conscious board members are relentless about understanding the data related to their stated goals. Therefore, they would set targets and goals for the administration to diversify staff at all levels of the organization to improve quality and representation of different races, religions, sexual orientations, and cultures within the school district. These board members would expect plans to be in place to continuously improve community representation and would not passively accept the status quo and large gaps between the percentages of students in the population and the percentages of staff with similar demographic backgrounds.

Freire (1970) warned that oppressed peoples “confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo” (p. 36). Conversely, the oppressed must not desire the role of the oppressor but rather seek restoration of humanity in both oppressed and oppressor. The oppressor is likely to be afraid of losing power over their self-interests (Freire, 1970). Therefore, changing the status quo to more closely represent the whole community can be a delicate process. Most important to these board members is a commitment to listening and understanding the lived experiences of school stakeholders and staff. If cultural data revealed that members of the community did not feel valued or respected, structures would be put in place to determine the root causes of those issues, and improvement plans would be expected to be created and monitored.

Conclusion

The school board is the government body closest to the community, and members are elected to represent the interests of the community. As the chief policy-making entity for a school district, the school board sets goals for student outcomes, provides oversight for operations of the district schools, hires a superintendent to enact its goals, and sets accountability standards to track progress toward its goals (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). The role of the school board is central to the success of a school district and its students. Concomitantly, school boards must be the driving force behind ensuring equity and excellence in schools. To do so, much more attention must be given to their ability to understand central issues of equity and act with urgency to address inequitable conditions within schools to promote excellence.

Critical consciousness has the objective of addressing systemic racism and oppression at its core (Freire, 2005). School board members who embrace critical consciousness have the power to be transformative and liberating. As they critically reflect, demonstrate critical motivation, and critically act, they can spark energy and change that can break the status quo that has perpetually resulted in marginalized communities being underresourced, undereducated, and underperforming. Adopting this framework of reflection, dialogue,

action, and reflection and sharing it with their colleagues can ensure better decision-making for all students.

Associations and organizations working to support the work of school boards should embed the tenants of Freire's (1974) conceptualization of critical consciousness into their professional development design. An understanding of this work at a deeper level can fuel more just and equitable school systems.

Disclosure statement

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Additional Resources

1. Aitchison, J., & McKay, V. (2021). A historical remembrance of Paulo Freire in South Africa: A tale of two activists. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 61, 335–352. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1331127.pdf>

Academics John Aitchison and Veronica McKay employed Freirean thought in apartheid South Africa and describe its impact on their respective praxis as academic activists. Aitchison and McKay reflect on how Freire's theories helped inform and advance the struggle against apartheid education. The authors credit Freire for substantially contributing to the South African struggle against institutional racism.

2. Tutu, D. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. Doubleday, Inc.

The author, Desmond Tutu, argues that failing to recognize the horrors humans can inflict upon one another does not serve the interest of the dominant group or its victims. Tutu shows that by engaging with the affected community, all parties gain insight that leads to redemption and reconciliation

3. Joseph, S., Arar, K., Karaburk, H., & Elbedour, S. (2023). Superintendents as social justice advocates for African American female students in STEM. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2261403>

Increasing the number of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) graduates involves attracting and maintaining more women of color in STEM careers. Superintendents can serve as social justice advocates to increase the number of African American female students to STEM fields. Superintendents also must address inequitable resource distribution and other marginalizing issues in school districts.