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Chapter

A New Theoretical Approach to Enacting Transformative Leadership With International Students

Michèle Schmidt, Kristina Berynets and Charles Scott

Abstract

Our focus in this chapter is the experience of international students in higher education in the Western contexts. The challenges faced by these students as a result of colonial attitudes and approaches in educational leadership are outlined. We ask how we can enact transformative leadership to support these students. We outline the dimensions of transformative leadership and review the postcolonial analyses of the challenges faced by these students. We then propose a theoretical framework, Pra-colonialism, that allows us to see these students in their fullness as students and as having the potential to become "more fully human." Pra-colonialism thus can enable us to enact the vision of transformative leadership in creating educationally humanizing conditions for international students.

Keywords: transformative leadership, international students, higher education

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the potential of transformative leadership enacted through a Pra-colonial lens for international education and international students. We argue that a Pra-transformative leadership approach can enable the educational experiences that will allow these students to flourish. We also problematize the situation by asking this research question: *How can transformative leadership be enacted to support international students in postsecondary education?* In response to this question, we offer a theoretical perspective—Pra-colonialism—that transformative leaders can enact in supporting international students. Therefore, this chapter offers an exciting new approach to theorizing how leadership, teaching, and pedagogy in higher education might better meet the learning needs of international students.

The significance and rationale for this chapter are in keeping with other higher education scholars' work about international students. For example, Collard [1] presents a compelling argument that leadership models have historically followed a Eurocentric approach in education and ultimately fails to address cultural diversity in the twenty-first century. These traditional leadership approaches actually alienate,

exclude, and disadvantage minority groups and international students. Furthermore, diverse student cultures are not acknowledged, celebrated, or examined for their "cultural fit" in the Western contexts. This calls for an introduction to a more contemporary and perhaps radical discourse that challenges colonial leadership epistemologies.

We introduce a Pra-colonial notion that moves beyond colonialism and post-colonialism in its intention to recognize and acknowledge intercultural notions of culture. As an educational community, we have not considered how educators perceive and thus respond to *international* students as opposed to *domestic* students in the context of higher education. The evidence is that even though we no longer call them the colonized or oppressed, we refer to them as international students, or, for example, ESL students, language learners, and non-native speakers. We concern ourselves with how well they adapt to our systems of education.

We are calling for an examination of our own deep-seated, core biases and how these biases then shape our perceptions of these students as *other*. We call this a Pra-colonial perspective because even though postcolonialism acknowledges the existence and value of others' cultures and not just the colonizer's culture, it (post-colonialism) does not offer a robust enough examination of its own culture and ways of perceiving. We are calling for an examination of interiors—phenomenological experiences and the creation of hermeneutic meaning—in addition to examining exteriors, such as context.

Western-centric leadership models hold little currency when leading international and other indigenous minorities toward educational success. New leadership approaches must "question normative discourses and practices from our [colonial] cultures…. The alternative is to indulge in a post-colonial form of professional practice which verges on imperialism and we should not be surprised if our deeply cherished, culturally derived values encounter resistance or fail to be implemented as we would expect in the West" ([1], p. 744). Leadership scholars such as Leithwood and Steinbach [2], Begley [3], Ribbins [4], Heck and Hallinger [5], and Dimmock and Walker [6] are ever reminding us not to forget about the important link between culture and leadership practice that Euro-centric epistemologies fail to address.

As long ago as 1988, Maxine Greene [7] argued that educational leaders need to raise the critical consciousness of those working and studying in the educational field to "… teaching toward the end of arousing a consciousness of membership, active and participant membership in a society of unfulfilled promises" (p. xxx), teaching for what Paulo Freire [8] used to call "conscientization" (*conscientização*) (p. 35): heightened social consciousness, a wide awakeness that might make injustice unendurable. With this in mind, a newer or more radically "woke" theoretical framework of leadership and its perspective on international student identity is needed for the twenty-first century. This is what we call a Pra-Transformative theory.

In this chapter, we will first review the literature on international students and their experience of higher education in the Western contexts, the impact of colonialism and post-colonialist perspectives on these students, and discuss how transformative leadership offers better possibilities for such students. We then offer a theoretical framework—Pra-Colonialism—that we believe transcends postcolonial perspectives and offers greater possibilities of success for international students in higher education. Finally, we offer insights into the behaviors and attitudes of transformative leaders and examples of how they might enact Pra-Transformative pedagogy. And in doing so, they are also instilling important activist and social justice values for international students and *all* students to prepare them for the twenty-first century.

2. Literature review

2.1 Students in the context of higher education

International students are encouraged to study in universities globally. They bring many benefits to institutions—from intercultural exchange to revenue from higher tuition and other fees [9]. Universities pride themselves on internationalizing education, providing global perspectives, and enriching campuses in many countries. At the same time, even though universities benefit from the internationalization of education both in terms of the knowledge and unique experiences that students bring as well as in terms of marketing, "international students" are ascribed a label that affects how they are viewed and positioned in the educational context. This label of "international student" has been problematized [9, 10] around the perception that the term implies homogeneity [11] within the group for the otherization [12] and, thus, maintains a deficit model [13] viewing students not only as different but, therefore, less than. This categorization is critiqued because universities use it to label students based on their visa status. However, this process has implications for how students are perceived. These assumptions about students include deficit language proficiency, academic literacy, different cultural values, beliefs, etc. that place international students as not fitting within the educational context. These assumptions then inspire the expectation that, regardless of the benefits for the university, students should adjust to the educational context unilaterally [14, 15].

On the other hand, universities are already privileging the students by accepting them and imposing knowledge, so there is little space for any relational approach, negotiating needs, or adjustment from the institutions. It is not surprising that research on international students' experiences, incorporating students' voices, and leadership practices that honor these experiences and voices are only recently starting to emerge. Page and Chanboun [9] highlight how, based on the fact that universities recruit international students for intercultural exchange, there is an assumption that international students seek to socialize and learn more about the host culture. This assumption appears in many studies without any evidence. Based on this assumption, much of the research on international students focuses on students' participation and socialization with host students. Page and Chanboun [9] state that "Once we realise that the students themselves may have different goals than those of the educational institutions, then their lack of integration with the host nationals ceases to be seen as a failure state" (p. 880).

Page and Chanboun [9] also point out that policy making, curriculum, and even research about international students fail to include students' voices in the conversation about them and their needs. This disregards their perspective and dehumanizes them ignoring that every student brings a unique background with experiences, expectations, needs, values, strengths, and knowledge. As a result, diversity is disregarded promoting discrimination and, with it, coloniality. Discussions such as these provide the impetus for more leadership research in this understudied field. Twenty-first-century leadership practices must be informed in such a way as to advocate for rather than undermine students who come from international locations in the world.

Jones [10] calls for problematization and reimagining of the categories assigned to students suggesting a framework of the various factors contributing to every student's experiences. She argues that the dichotomy does not serve anyone because students are influenced by various factors, making them unique. Heng [11] similarly

argues for addressing the heterogeneity within student populations by policy makers. We understand that the distinction may not be erroneous or stems from a lack of understanding of international students. Often, absences or silences reveal a lot about bias. For instance, research on academic literacy, the knowledge of discipline-specific language and genres, focuses on participants for whom, just like for the second author of this chapter, English is an additional language [16–18] and ignores the needs of domestic or native-speaking students. The gap may indicate that students are expected to require more training in academic literacy even though, as mentioned above, academic literacy has more to do with discipline-specific skills than language proficiency. In Canadian educational settings, this view of low language proficiency as an indicator of low academic literacy seems common. For example, EAL students would usually be admitted to educational programs based on standardized language test scores, such as IELTS, iTEP, or TOEFL, even though these tests' effectiveness has been questioned and critiqued [19, 20]. If scores are insufficient for admission, meaning that students are believed to lack language proficiency, EAL students may often be required to take additional courses. These distinctions exist, though challenged as detrimental to student learning and marginalizing. They are built on the coloniality inherent in higher education.

2.2 The impact of colonialism and post-colonialism on international students

Coloniality refers to the ongoing practices and ways of being, doing, and knowing in various contexts, including education, which does not only favor Eurocentric or Western frameworks as better or more valuable than the indigenous, Asian, South American, African (and the list may go on) ontologies and epistemologies but may even recognize the Eurocentric framework as the only legitimate one. Higher education has been recognized as one of the spaces and places that not only serve as terrain for colonial practices but have also been created based on the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies [21]. This chapter attempts to acknowledge and challenge the coloniality within higher education. Postcolonial theory problematizes the positioning of the colonized and the colonizer and sheds light on the inherent power dynamics that affect the said colonized and colonizer and various contexts.

Kubota [22] discusses the critiques of postcolonialism as well as theories that are aimed at disrupting colonial discourses and power dynamics, including hybridity [23] or multiplicity and plurality [24]. However, these theories, in turn, may still tend to "turn our gaze away" from the issues that still persist. For example, in Canadian education (and arguably other educational contexts), the phrase "international students" and the phrase "domestic students" are taken up as if they are neutral, taken up with little consideration of the ideologies behind them [25, 26]. So, there has been little focus on how educators construct the perception of the said other (international student as opposed to [domestic] student) in the context of higher education. The focus is largely on the students and whether or not they "fit" in the educational context. The critique of post-colonialism is based on the fact that it does little to challenge and shift the power dynamics and the status quo. Arguably, it creates power dynamics by ascribing the identities of the colonized and the colonizer, essentializing them, and almost stabilizing the dominance of one over the other.

Decoloniality [27, 28] is the theory and praxis to challenge coloniality. It is called to challenge the Western views as the legitimate or standard framework and, frankly,

as the only framework. Our "Pra-perspective," outlined below, is our theoretical decolonial response, offering a perspective that educational administrators can employ as part of their transformative leadership efforts. The framework of decoloniality places the issue of international students as othered within these settings as a colonial practice. International students are othered and forced to learn about the context because it does not recognize them in one essentialist knowledge system. We would argue that the ongoing othering of international students and framing differences as a deficit [29] stem from the internalized belief in the centrality and legitimacy of Western epistemology.

There is extensive research on the identity construction of international students and international identity with primacy placed on an individual's construction and positioning in context [30–32]. While it is recognized that students are socioculturally positioned, there is this narrative in how students are being perceived, whether contextually or individually, as the "other" (i.e., internationally rather than domestic, non-native rather than native) linguistically, culturally, or racially. When these students are perceived in these ways, they are then positioned as being "less than" in many respects, particularly linguistically and epistemically. So, there has been little focus on how educators construct the perception of the said "other" in the context of higher education. The focus is largely on the students and whether or not they "fit" in the educational context; with that focus, students are often essentialized [33]. Thus, as much as we champion cultural diversity, we still lump individuals under superficial essentialist umbrellas of what are usually outer characteristics that hide or even obviate inner uniqueness and diversity. As Biesta [34] maintains, we offer students the "common discourse" of their provisional membership in the "rational community"; however, he argues that we "… at the very same time de-legitimize other ways of speaking" (p. 312). The rational community, especially in its educational contexts, demands its voice. Fuchs [35], like Bauman [36], Biesta [34], and Lingis [37], draws our attention to the categorizing and labeling tendencies of reason.

This point is important for international students in educational contexts because educational leaders and instructors often ignore the focus on their identities and identity construction when they are positioned as international. Biesta [34], in citing the earlier work of Zygmunt Bauman [36] on postmodern ethics, argues for a "genuine emancipatory chance" based, not in any postcolonial sense of valorizing tribalism, but rather in "the question as to what it means to be a subject" (p. 315). While our postcolonial efforts to recognize the cultural traditions and heritage of the students are laudatory, they often utterly fail to recognize the inherent humanity of such students or the possibility of what Freire [8] repeatedly refers to as "becoming more fully human" (p. 44), a task recognized by transformative leaders as central to education.

Hongyu Wang [38] refers to a "third space," a space, in contrast to the confines of essentialism, in which "… people can live together expressing their own uniqueness without doing violence to one another," a space which arises out of "… two original moments in cultural translation and its hybridity supports the emergence of new positions, structures, and activities" (p. 9). It is a space that can be cultural, psychic, intersubjective, gendered, regional, national, global, or even cosmic; it is a space of dynamic, unfolding possibility. We wish to offer a theoretical framing that offers the possibility of such a third space for these students, thus contributing to the emancipatory work envisioned by transformative leadership.

2.3 Transformative leadership as a gateway to success for international students

Transformative leadership is "distinct from other theories such as transformational or transactional leadership" ([39], p. 558). Shields [39] advocates for learning in contexts where all participants' overall development and well-being are promoted, along with an orientation to social justice. Such transformative practices emerge out of what Blackmore [40] refers to as the "politics of difference" (p. 26). Carolyn Shields [39] describes transformative leadership as including both local and global perspectives that attend to the learning and well-being needs of all participants; deconstructing knowledge frameworks and power relations, especially those that contribute toward inequity; offering a balance of critique and hope; working toward "liberation, emancipation, deep democracy, equity, and justice" while also working toward achieving organizational goals that foster inclusion (p. 2). Such leadership is critically transformative, and mindful of possible requirements for significant and systemic change to improve well-being for all participants and the best means of implementing such changes. Maxine Greene [7] asserts that our role as educational leaders is to assist students in becoming "citizens of the free world–having the capacity to choose, the power to act to attain one's purposes and the ability to help transform a world lived in common with others" (p. 32). Greene's advocacy resonates as a foundation of transformative leadership, which focuses on "not only what *can* be done … but also on what *should* be done for a better and more just society" ([7], p. 21). Since our focus is on students, Blackmore adds, "What leaders *can* do is transform unequal conditions of power and resources … that may enable others to mobilize their sense of agency" ([40], p. 23).

2.4 Transformative learning and pedagogy

Transformative learning and pedagogy [41], guided by transformative leadership, move beyond mere knowledge acquisition at the cognitive level and include more nuanced learning aspects that include emotions, spirituality, and mindfulness. Transformative learning "changes the way people see themselves and their world. It attempts to explain how their expectations, framed within cultural assumptions and presuppositions, directly influence the meaning they derive from their experiences" [42]. By realizing their agency, students increase awareness and critical reflection. Students become aware of oppressive structures and practices and learn strategic awareness to change these structures and practices through activism and collective change. Seminal educational theories offer valuable insight into how this impactful learning can be achieved. For example, Friere's [8] work provides a practical and theoretical approach to emancipation through education by showing students how to develop an "ontological vocation": "to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his [sic] world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of a fuller and richer life individually and collectively" (p. 32). Freire calls for a social transformation, a "demythologizing" of reality, and an awakening of critical consciousness "whereby people perceive the social, political, and economic contradictions of their time and take action against the oppressive elements" ([42], p. 18), through critical reflection and dialog with other learners. With such foundational tenets in mind, transformative leadership and pedagogy include purposeful activities such as cultural autobiographies, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, arts-based and other contemplative forms of expression, prejudice reduction workshops, cross-cultural interviews, intercultural development, educational plunges, diversity panels, reflective analysis journals,

and activist training to assist students (and leaders and faculty) in developing their capacity to engage in self-directed learning, critical reflection, experiential learning, and opportunities for learning to learn. These learning opportunities are, essentially, opportunities for identity transformation and becoming "more fully human."

In Hooks' *Education as the Practice of Freedom* [43], she echoes Friere [8] by urging learners to resist "false consciousness" and educators to empower and equip students to interrogate the political implications of racism, sexism, and classism and externally imposed curriculum standards, banking pedagogical approaches, and hierarchical arrangements within educational settings. Transformative leaders and educators become, in essence, educational activists, teaching students to act politically and advocate individually and collectively for themselves and other marginalized groups.

Activism requires Freire's [8] critical consciousness and the means to organize for action reflectively. Students must also develop "a sense of political efficacy and be given practice in social action strategies which teach them how to get power without violence and further exclusion" (p. 149) [44]. Leaders can emphasize opportunities in the curriculum for social action, where students can exercise power to help liberate marginalized groups or individuals.

2.5 Attitudes and behaviors of transformative leaders

Transformative leaders serve as moral stewards, investing in "reflective analysis and … active intervention" ([45], p. 268) rather than maintaining the status quo. Zammit-Lucia [46] describes the characteristics of "good" leadership in the twenty-first century era of activism as: "Effective leaders encourage dissent and activism, combining listening skills with the ability to define and live up to a convincing moral and political vision" (para. 8). He admonishes that leadership (of the past) that maintains the status quo typically defers from "science" when faced with conflict, which he describes as "politically expedient, in that it allows groups to justify any decision in scientific terms. However, most often, such a response is a sign of weakness….Science is not equipped to make decisions that are fundamentally moral and political….Effective leaders do not hide behind such transparent veils" (para. 8). In other words, transformative leaders achieve transformation through decisive activism and resistance to change with clear and consistent political and moral goals. In this way, Zammitt-Lucia [46] compellingly argues that "activism …. is a fact of life and needs encouragement in an increasingly complex world. Only leadership that can present a coherent moral and political vision, and act accordingly, will ensure that reasonable opposition will result in constructive dialogue rather than paralysis and the subordination of the common good to narrow interests. Sadly, such leadership seems increasingly uncommon even as the need for it becomes more essential" (para. 13).

We are thus reminded that such leadership and teaching require courage and vulnerability to confront one's biases in an educational community to be authentic and effective [42]. Fullan [47] emphasizes that, "Conflict, if respected, is positively associated with creative breakthroughs under complex, turbulent conditions" (p. 22). Shields and Hesbol [48] note that transformative leaders make it essential: to establish "mutually respectful relationships with students, staff, families, and the community"; to be mindful of each student's race, ethnicity, linguistics, and sociocultural and economic positioning; and to offer learning opportunities that allow the students to flourish. However, Shields and Hesbol [48] discovered in their recent research that "until mindsets change, and both implicit bias and deficit assumptions are overcome,

then equity, inclusion, and social justice will remain illusory" (p. 558). This recognition and the resulting work of mindset change are vital as the foundations upon which transformative learning opportunities can be developed.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 What do we mean by a Pra-colonialism perspective?

Bai, Cohen, Culham, Park, Rabi, Scott, and Tait [49] write, "The greatest educational challenge today is not downloading more, better, sophisticated knowledge and skills into students but helping them to cultivate the unity of heart and mind ..." (p. 289). In another publication [50], we outline a Pra[colonial] framework, intersecting with transformative leadership, that allows us to engage with students in ways that develop heart and mind and develop the full potential of humanity already present within the students.

Pra is a word from Sanskrit, and it may be called a contronym as it means both "before" and "forward, forth." [51] Postcolonial theory and, even more so, decoloniality inspired the Pra perspective. We are offering it to recognize the epistemic diversity that was widely present and recognized before colonization and to explore ways forward now that we live with the remains of coloniality. Perhaps the most important aspect of Pra is that the word must be used with verbs to gain its contronymic meaning (before and forward), which is central to our aim. Therefore, the implication is that it calls for actions, perhaps an active position, continuous effort, and inner dive, without which any work of transformative leadership simply lacks in meaning.

We do not wish to present a post-postcolonial perspective; instead, we are referring to the ontology of such people before colonialism while also representing their ontological wholeness, completion, and excellence. The other possible contribution of our perspective builds on decoloniality, a concept and also praxis, and a call for action for those who were colonized or positioned and affected by colonization. The Pra perspective is a way to reorient the thinking and do some "inner diving" for those who represent the colonizer and the Eurocentric worldview and continue to recreate the practices we are trying to move away from. Ours is an ethical-onto-epistemological [52] perspective, embodying the moral obligations and relationality between humans, bodies, and places, reorienting our ways of being, doing, and thinking. It is a tool that hopes to contribute to the conversation, especially in education. It would also imply moving forward—away from and beyond or forward from colonial practices, worldviews, and hierarchies, where the power dynamics and mimicry [23] and the one [Eurocentric] "universal standard" would hopefully no longer exist.

Pra-colonialism and transformative leadership critique inequitable practices and offer the promise of greater individual achievement and a better life lived in common with others ... transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and education leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded ([39], p. 559).

The Pra-colonial perspective acknowledges the importance of intersubjective encounters in the *Lebenswelt*, the "life world" [53], the "pool" of perception and experience generated in and between individual subjectivities. Encountering other subjectivities allows us to realize that there is more to the experience of the world

than our own solitary perceptions can afford us. We are meeting, engaging, and encountering another human. There is at least the possibility of encountering the foundational human *qua* human. This, we maintain, is the Pra-colonial turn, the Pra-colonial move. Transformative leadership can serve as a means of enabling such a turn.

4. Conclusion

4.1 What happens when we intersect Pra-colonialism and transformative leadership

The intersections of transformative leadership and Pra perspective on identity are germane to our discussion. Being aware that, from a poststructuralist perspective, identity is a negotiated process in the contexts of social location and positioning, how are students positioned? How are student identities negotiated, if at all, with educational leaders? What powers do students have to express themselves as they wish within the curriculum? The roles of leaders in curriculum development and pedagogies of the oppressed become evident. Do the theories and foundations of educational leadership, administrative systems and policies, organizational cultures, curricula, pedagogy, and assessment allow students to be seen for who they truly are, for who and what they wish to become? Shields and Hesbol [48] conclude:

> *To meet the needs of rapidly changing populations, whether immigrant or refugee, whether they speak the language of instruction or not, whether they have experienced trauma or not, and whether the school is in a vibrant urban setting or a remote rural setting, it is incumbent on school leaders ... to lead in ways that promote inclusion, equity, and excellence for every student (p. 559).*

As Sayani [54] asks, what is the epistemic status of the student's lived experience and knowing? We begin with reflections on our mind-sets around that question. We have outlined here a Pra [colonial] framework, intersecting with and guided by transformative leadership, that allows us to engage with students in ways that develop body, heart, and mind and develop the full potential of humanity already present with the students.

Again, we want to stress that our Pra perspective includes consideration of cultural, regional, gender, or other such unique characteristics of the students; but it also transcends them. Our perspective "precedes," in an ontological sense, these considerations. Suppose we are willing to recognize students in their basic humanity. In that case, we can strive as educational leaders to create educationally humanizing conditions, working toward the possibilities of what Freire [8] refers to as "becoming fully human." As Bai, Park, and Cohen [49] note in distinguishing education from mere instruction:

> *Education is for growing, raising, maturing, cultivating, and fulfilling human beings, manifesting the full potential of humanity....[the wisdom] traditions share an understanding that education has to do with human becoming .... the larger aim of education that the wisdom traditions hold up before us: humans increasingly maturing into and embodying a fuller humanity that can manifest wisdom and virtue (pp. 114–115).*

We do not believe that simply applying a transformative leadership paradigm to the problem of engaging international students in higher education in a manner that simply "transcends" colonialism and Euro-centric pedagogical practices is the solution. Instead, we believe that a genuinely radical leadership paradigm shift lacks meaning or cannot occur unless a call for action occurs by intersecting a Pra perspective with the praxis of transformative leadership.

In summary, then, Pra-colonialism challenges colonialism and post-colonialism by offering a heuristic to problematize deeply ingrained ideologies that international students are less than or different from other students. We suggest that by viewing international students *as* students, leadership, and faculty respond as if providing equity, inclusivity, and diversity in their regular classrooms with "regular" students. Current ideologies have resulted in pedagogical practices rooted in a deficit model or oppressive pedagogical and curriculum approaches that limit the potential of what can happen in classrooms. To mitigate current damaging approaches, we suggest a Pra-transformative perspective that recognizes *and* legitimates the students' subjectivity and lived experience, offering and enacting transformative pedagogical opportunities where student identities can be explored as a means of becoming more fully human.

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