

ADVANCE COPY—NOT FINAL. NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION.

# FINDING YOUR LEADERSHIP SOUL

What Our  
Students Can  
Teach Us About  
Love, Care, and  
Vulnerability

We had so many  
incredible experiences  
together that now,  
even as  
fond memories  
on my most challenging  
days, I truly miss him  
and think of him  
often.

Remembering his kindness  
and care for his  
brothers, and close  
friends gives me tremendous  
comfort and confidence  
that he would be  
doing for me and  
everything in his power  
that you

CARLOS R. MORENO





2800 Shirlington Road, Suite 1001 • Arlington, VA 22206 USA  
Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600 • Fax: 703-575-5400  
Website: [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org) • Email: [member@ascd.org](mailto:member@ascd.org)  
Author guidelines: [www.ascd.org/write](http://www.ascd.org/write)

Richard Culatta, *Chief Executive Officer*; Anthony Rebora, *Chief Content Officer*; Genny Ostertag, *Managing Director, Book Acquisitions & Editing*; Susan Hills, *Senior Acquisitions Editor*; Mary Beth Nielsen, *Director, Book Editing*; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Editor*; Thomas Lytle, *Creative Director*; Donald Ely, *Art Director*; Yassmin Raiszadeh/The Hatcher Group, *Graphic Designer*; Valerie Younkin, *Senior Production Designer*; Kelly Marshall, *Production Manager*; Shajuan Martin, *E-Publishing Specialist*; Christopher Logan, *Senior Production Specialist*

Copyright © 2024 ASCD. All rights reserved. It is illegal to reproduce copies of this work in print or electronic format (including reproductions displayed on a secure intranet or stored in a retrieval system or other electronic storage device from which copies can be made or displayed) without the prior written permission of the publisher. By purchasing only authorized electronic or print editions and not participating in or encouraging piracy of copyrighted materials, you support the rights of authors and publishers. Readers who wish to reproduce or republish excerpts of this work in print or electronic format may do so for a small fee by contacting the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, USA (phone: 978-750-8400; fax: 978-646-8600; web: [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)). To inquire about site licensing options or any other reuse, contact ASCD Permissions at [www.ascd.org/permissions](http://www.ascd.org/permissions) or [permissions@ascd.org](mailto:permissions@ascd.org). For a list of vendors authorized to license ASCD ebooks to institutions, see [www.ascd.org/epubs](http://www.ascd.org/epubs). Send translation inquiries to [translations@ascd.org](mailto:translations@ascd.org).

ASCD® is a registered trademark of Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All other trademarks contained in this book are the property of, and reserved by, their respective owners, and are used for editorial and informational purposes only. No such use should be construed to imply sponsorship or endorsement of the book by the respective owners.

All web links in this book are correct as of the publication date below but may have become inactive or otherwise modified since that time. If you notice a deactivated or changed link, please email [books@ascd.org](mailto:books@ascd.org) with the words “Link Update” in the subject line. In your message, please specify the web link, the book title, and the page number on which the link appears.

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-3263-4 ASCD product #123025 n12/23  
PDF EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-4166-3264-1; see Books in Print for other formats.  
Quantity discounts are available: email [programteam@ascd.org](mailto:programteam@ascd.org) or call 800-933-2723, ext. 5773, or 703-575-5773. For desk copies, go to [www.ascd.org/deskcopy](http://www.ascd.org/deskcopy).

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Moreno, Carlos R., author.

Title: Finding your leadership soul : what our students can teach us about love, care, and vulnerability / Carlos R. Moreno.

Description: Arlington, Virginia USA : ASCD, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023037724 (print) | LCCN 2023037725 (ebook) | ISBN 9781416632634 (paperback) | ISBN 9781416632641 (pdf ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational leadership.

Classification: LCC LB2806 .M62 2024 (print) | LCC LB2806 (ebook) | DDC 371.2/011—dc23/eng/20230912

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023037724>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023037725>

33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24      1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

**ADVANCE COPY—NOT FINAL. NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION.**

**3RD PAGES**

## TITLE/TOC TREATMENT TK

Foreword: On Leading, Becoming, and Soul .....	xvii
<i>To My Younger Self (Age 15)</i> .....	1
Chapter 1: My Leadership Journey .....	4
Chapter 2: Why This Book? .....	29
Chapter 3: Leading with Love, Care, and Vulnerability .....	45
<i>To Rosa Morales (Josue’s Mom)</i> .....	54
Chapter 4: Josue .....	58
<i>To Angelis León (Angel’s Daughter)</i> .....	65
Chapter 5: Angel .....	68
<i>To Shawn Gooding</i> .....	76
Chapter 6: Shawn .....	80
Chapter 7: A Commitment to Understanding and Action .....	87
Conclusion .....	94
<i>To Michael Walters</i> .....	104
<i>To Isabella Moreno</i> .....	108
Acknowledgments .....	111
References .....	114
Index .....	120
About the Author .....	124



## To My Younger Self (Age 15)

*Mi fuerte Carlito,*

I know you. And I know that a terrible thing just happened to you. Two men—men who could have been your uncle, friend, or neighbor—brazenly and violently assaulted you and stole your jacket—a jacket that was meaningful to you not because of the bright Cincinnati Bengals logo stitched to the back (in fact, you don't even like the Bengals!), but because of the sacrifice your mom made to get it for your birthday.

These men didn't just steal your jacket—they also robbed you of your innocence. At the time, neither you nor they could have fully appreciated the vulnerability and fear introduced in that moment and how it would define you. As happens with so many Black and Brown teenage boys, this altercation—lasting only five minutes, though it felt like eternity—catapulted you from a boy to a man in an instant, though mostly not in ways that were positive.

Nearly 30 years later, I want to share what I have learned so that you can continue being a teenager who is cool enough to spin records and DJ from your fourth-floor bedroom window for everyone on the block while also playing Antonio in The Merchant of Venice. You are talented and creative; music and Shakespeare make you happy. Do not allow those men and that moment to take these things away. I want to extend the love and care that the adults in your life should have provided in the aftermath of this trauma. They shouldn't have assumed everything was OK when you showed clear and painful signs of having been harmed.

I see you. I see the scars. I see the tears that you do not shed in public but that flow at night when you're in bed. I am here to allow you to be vulnerable—to share your feelings of fear and frustration. And while I wish that you had not felt the need to turn to people who do not share your values for protection, I understand. You feel safe with them. They assure you that no one will ever lay hands on you like that again.

Please know that I want you to experience joy—you deserve joy—Black boy joy, the type of joy that only comes from allowing yourself to



love and be loved. You deserve pure, unconditional love, and you should love unconditionally and purely. This love will fuel your spirit in ways that you simply cannot imagine.

Think of the love you have for Grandma Isabel. I know it's hard to feel it because you can only imagine having conversations with her while standing at her doorway, since you always have something cooler to do than sit down with her. Trade that feeling of impatience for an appreciation of her strength and wisdom. As you mature, Grandma Isabel will be your biggest and most vocal cheerleader. She will brag about you even when there's really nothing to brag about. You will come to understand how much she has sacrificed to ensure that our family could be where they are today. A time will come when you are able to return a small portion of the love and care she shows to you and so many others in our family. She will remain the matriarch of our family until she is overcome by a deadly virus that will kill more than a million Americans and millions more around the world. Until her death, she will be loved and cared for by family and friends, because she loved so many. She will also experience unselfish love in the form of service from care providers who will risk their lives for her.

Embrace her. Celebrate her. Shower her with love.

I want you to know that, while the Bronx seems like a deplorable place to you, Grandma will live here until she passes. Mom and Dad, most of your siblings, and most of your beloved nieces and nephews will remain there, too. And there will soon be a handful of amazing political figures who truly represent the Bronx in beautiful and truthful ways: former New York City Schools' Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter, U.S. Representatives Jamaal Bowman and Ritchie Torres—even a Latina Supreme Court justice, Sonia Sotomayor. The Bronx is representing! If you stay strong and do not give into fear, you will be added to this roster of notable figures.

I implore you to embrace love. Love comes in many forms. Look for it to come to you from a caring and committed community member. Ms. Cheryl Williams will see in you what you are struggling to see in yourself. Allow her to guide you. She will open doors, erect fences, and embrace you, but only if you allow her to care for you. Do that. You deserve to be cared for and to feel safe.

*By the time you reach my age, you will have become an educator. You will have the joy and privilege of helping young people live their fullest lives and dreams. You will do so with care, compassion, and commitment—in part because of your relationship with Cheryl. She gets credit for our watchful eye and our ability to reach the students who are pulling the furthest away—the ones who need the strongest embrace.*

*It is often the loudest, toughest, and scariest among us who are the most susceptible to emotional harm—that's why they protect themselves so strongly. The guys who robbed you were fearful of physical harm, so they carried guns. But please know that you need not follow that path. There are too many young boys like you who believe this path is their only option. As a result, too many Black and Brown boys are being expelled, incarcerated, or worse. I don't want that for you. I don't want that for us.*

*Over time, you will learn how to be vulnerable. It will begin with you embracing the feeling of being different. It is perfectly OK for you to want to spend time with Mr. Kelly, the only Black male teacher at your school. Only 2 percent of teachers nationwide are Black men. Allow yourself to ask questions and get to know him. Let your curiosity fuel and lead you. As an educator, each relationship you will have with each student will be special, but you will be uniquely appreciative of the relationships you forge with a few of your Black and Brown male students. You and they both will recognize and appreciate the rarity of those opportunities. Trust me: drop your cool veneer and spend time with Mr. Kelly. You both will value it.*

*Your ancestors are watching and protecting you, Carlito. They will place people along your life's path to guide you when you need it most. Recognize and respect them and allow them to guide you. Life is an exceptional teacher. To understand it, you must live it, which includes learning from those around you.*

*I love and admire the young man that you are, and I hope you think the same of the man you will become.*

*Que Dios te cuide,*

*Carlos*

**ADVANCE COPY—NOT FINAL. NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION.**

**3RD PAGES**

# 1

## My Leadership Journey

In the grand scheme of things, the loss of a jacket was inconsequential. Rather, it was the harsh and violent way it was taken, the humiliation, and the physical harm that mattered. The injustice and unfairness were profound. In the aftermath of the assault, I was overcome with feelings of shame. The psychological and physical trauma had a hold on me. Like my outside injuries, my insides were raw, exposed, and bloody. Yet the harshest blow was that the world around me continued just as it had before. I was expected to respond as though everything were normal, to ignore the visible and invisible injuries and go right back to being a high school student. The bells still rang and students still crowded the hallways, unaware of the violation I had suffered. The police showed not a hint of anything that resembled sympathy. There was no search for the perpetrators, just a paltry incident report. It was only at home that the empathy I so deeply yearned for was amply provided. There, safe in the care of my loved ones, I could truly begin to heal.

Trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem (2017) examines the impact of traumatic events on both individuals and future generations if the



trauma is left untreated. When we respond to trauma with the most wounded parts of ourselves, become cruel or violent, or run away, we experience “dirty pain” (p. 20)—and that pain can be transferred to other people, exacerbating feelings of anger, violence, and mistrust. In attempting to avoid pain and discomfort, we create more of it for ourselves and others. To heal collectively, we must be willing to engage in and feel “clean pain”—to slow down, drop into our bodies, and learn how we are responding to our present moment. Menakem is careful to acknowledge that trauma is not destiny, but survivors with unhealed trauma are better served by a mindfulness of their own response to that trauma. We don’t need to be perfect or calm all the time, but it is important to understand the history of our responses so that we can engage in our lives with presence and vulnerability.

If I hadn’t had the love and support of my family, how might my trauma have shaped my destiny differently? I believe that the robbery of my jacket was a profound and revelatory moment in my development that transformed the way I looked at the world. I did not want this trauma to be what defined me. I wanted to take what helped me heal and have those healing influences shape the way I looked at the world in positive ways.

I think often about the daily traumas experienced by so many students. What about the young people who don’t even have a jacket to steal? What about the students without homes to go to or families who can lavish affection and care on them? What about the scores of young people who still report that they don’t have even one trusted adult at their school they could go to for help? It is imperative that we find ways to reach our youth and provide the support that they so desperately seek.

We know that teachers who share some of the same lived experiences as their students better understand their needs. And that school leaders who have close connections with their school’s communities can better advocate for their students based on deep understanding (Callahan, 2020). Tragically, there is a dearth of educators

who fit this description in schools across the nation. According to National Center for Education Statistics data for 2017–2018, white women make up the vast majority of teachers—79 percent, compared to only 7 percent for Black teachers and 9 percent for Latinx teachers. Simply put, too few students in too few schools are able to see themselves in their educators, and this is particularly true of Black and Brown male students, who together make up between 10 and 11 percent of the national student body (NCES, 2023).

Even before they enter school, Black and Brown boys face many issues that negatively affect their life trajectories. Issues of racism begin in utero. According to the National Partnership for Women & Families (2018), Latinas have a higher birth rate nationwide than white or Black women and a slightly lower maternal mortality rate than white women, but they still do not receive adequate prenatal care or nonmedical support throughout and following childbirth. And Black mothers are more likely to receive subpar care and experience higher mortality rates before, during, and after delivery (Taylor, 2020). Black boys are subject to higher mortality rates—and in far too many cases their prospects remain grim as they grow older. Even as life expectancies for all people in the United States have nearly doubled over the past century, the life expectancy for Black males has persistently lagged behind all other subgroups (Bond & Herman, 2016).

Too often, the words *Black*, *Latinx*, and *the Bronx* bring with them assumptions of poverty, limited opportunities, crime, and violence. As a group, Black and Latino males are often pathologized as unmotivated and academically disinterested, with bleak prospects and few opportunities. It is not likely that a young Afro-Caribbean boy from the Bronx would be provided with opportunities to develop the tools necessary to achieve success, including high-quality learning experiences in school. Schools in the Bronx and other major urban communities have been historically underfunded and underresourced, with limited access to postsecondary experiences. For these reasons, we tend to celebrate the young men who “make it out.” We laud their accomplishments

because they are seen as exceptional. *Why don't we do the same for the young men who stay?* We must stop assuming that the labels that many in our society place upon these young people truly describe their potential.

Growing up, I had no intention of pursuing a leadership role in education. If someone had told me that I was going to become a teacher, I would have laughed! How many 6-foot-8 Black male teachers have you seen? I did not feel that I belonged at the head of a classroom.

Or did I? Could it be that my experience growing up as a young Afro-Latino boy in the Bronx would be beneficial? That students who looked like me, were raised like me, and had similar trajectories needed an educator like me? And that I needed them?

## My Life in the Bronx

To understand me as a teenager, you must understand the Bronx in the 1960s. My neighborhood shaped who I was to become nearly as much as my family and others I encountered during that time did. Prior to the 1960s, the Bronx was one of the fastest-growing urban areas in the world. It served as an enclave for second-generation immigrants who were escaping the overcrowded neighborhoods of Manhattan. While the Bronx was typical of large urban cities undergoing significant changes, it was also a special place. According to Evelyn Gonzalez (2004), it was “famous for its stable ethnic neighborhoods and housing units [that] on average were better than those of Brooklyn and Manhattan” (p. 5).

The 1960s saw large-scale change in the Bronx, with its demographics evolving dramatically due to white flight, redlining, housing shortages, public housing, and growing urbanization of the borough. By the 1970s, any mention of the Bronx elicited images of burned-out buildings and lawlessness. “Most assessments of the devastation of the 1960s and 1970s emphasize race, crime, poverty, [construction of] the Cross-Bronx Expressway, and Co-op City and ignore a century of urban growth in the Bronx,” writes Gonzalez. “Yet it is this ongoing



urbanization and neighborhood change that helps explain the devastation and consequent revival that occurred” (p. 5).

According to Gonzalez, what happened in the Bronx was by design: rapid urbanization through construction patterns and building development corralled residents into a densely populated area. Research on the Bronx in the 1970s and 1980s is limited, and most of it focuses on the abysmal living conditions of the South Bronx. There is little to no mention of how communities were built and sustained or how schooling impacted the growing Black and Latinx communities.

The 1970s and 1980s were tumultuous times for all of New York City, but especially for the Bronx. New York was at its lowest point in the 1970s thanks to a serious fiscal crisis accompanied by an overall decline in safety. Subways were dangerous. Murders, rapes, burglaries, and car thefts reached record-setting numbers. Even relatively prosperous sections of the Bronx such as Pelham Bay, Locust Point, and Riverdale did not escape the general malaise. The poor economy affected public services throughout the city.

For the roughly 30 percent of the Bronx that is labeled the “South Bronx,” the situation was even worse. Indeed, the 1970s were labeled the “decade of fire,” with 7 South Bronx census tracts losing about 97 percent of their buildings to fire and abandonment and an additional 44 tracts losing about half of their buildings (Ricciulli, 2019). The South Bronx was the literal and figurative “hot spot,” its reputation cemented as much by folktales as by hard data (Mahler, 2006). While Bronx neighborhoods well to the north were relatively safe, it was still quite easy to watch the burning South Bronx from a rooftop in Riverdale and feel the threat (Diaz, 2011).

Growing up in New York City, I was surrounded by Black and Latinx folks, and they all looked like me. I did not pay much attention to my identity until I entered middle school, where it was brought to my attention by my peers. I was relatively sheltered from having to decide who I was up until that point; I did not need to decide if I was Black or Latino. Around middle school and high school, I gravitated toward my fellow Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, but I was always

the darkest one in the group. I remember at different times feeling as though I did not have full acceptance from my Latinx friends due to my Afro-Latino appearance.

When I started kindergarten, I spoke only Spanish. I was placed in bilingual classes, where I remained until 3rd grade. When I was growing up, you were either Black or Puerto Rican; no one really tried to understand the nuances and differences of Latinidad. Yet here I was, a Dominican child who primarily spoke Spanish, when most kids who looked like me already spoke English.

I think that this was the beginning of the labeling and grouping I experienced in my schooling. English learners often face achievement and attainment gaps in their learning (Umansky & Dumont, 2021) due in large part to teacher perceptions and formal classification as English learners (ELs). The foundation for my K–12 trajectory was laid as soon as I was labeled EL. Researchers suggest that students in bilingual classrooms are often framed in a deficit manner—they are seen for what they are unable to do rather than what they have the potential to do (Cross, 2020; Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006). As students, ELs are too often considered problems that need fixing (Gutiérrez & Orellana, 2006), which can lead to negative experiences. These students are often tracked into general or special education classes (Kanno & Kangas, 2014), placed in classes with less skilled teachers (Gandara et al., 2003), and, in the long term, negatively impacted and provided with fewer academic opportunities (Umansky & Dumont, 2021).

While in elementary school at Public School 246, I had one male teacher, Mr. Montalban. He probably had the greatest impact on my learning. His 3rd grade class was the first time I'd been taught in a nonbilingual classroom. In fact, at that point I was placed in gifted and talented (G&T) classes, which lasted until 6th grade. I owe my placement in G&T classes to Mr. Montalban, who advocated for me and believed in my academic abilities and intelligence.

However, after I graduated from elementary school to junior high, it was all downhill. No one cared that I had been in G&T classes at

P.S. 246. None of the teachers and administrators in junior high school (and, later, high school) looked like me or my elementary classmates. It was apparent that they had already made up their minds about who we were as students, and they made little investment in guaranteeing our academic success. I was not being academically challenged, and my teachers were not paying attention to my strengths. I was, after all, just another Black kid from the Bronx.

And it wasn't just my skin color. By the time I was 10 years old, I was taller, bigger, and stronger than all of my friends and most of the teachers. This earned me the nickname "Big Man," which I loved. "Big Man" was never a descriptor for my attitude or behavior; I was a well-behaved and well-mannered kid. However, looking back on my childhood, I experienced adultification much sooner than I would have liked. There was an expectation from adults—mostly teachers—that I needed to be tougher, more mature, and more serious as a young child rather than the silly, energetic, goofy kid that I was. I liked to laugh and be playful. Joy should not be stripped from a young person simply because they happen to be taller and larger than their peers.

Unfortunately, this happens to many Black and Latino boys, who are often stereotyped and viewed with contempt, resulting in negative and often traumatic experiences. "Historically, Black men have endeavored to counter the oppressive stereotypes that proclaim them as all body and no mind, bucks and beasts, monsters, and demons," writes Dancy (2014). "However, nonviolent Black males continue to face a world that sees them as violent" (p. 51). My Latino identity also triggered adultification. In school, there were expectations of how a Brown boy should behave, and concepts such as *machismo* influenced how I was treated by teachers and my peers.

Somewhat ironically, I got bullied in elementary school. A lot. I seldom had problems with anyone my size; it was often the smaller kids who challenged me. Perhaps they harbored inferiority complexes. Why they took it out on me, I will never understand, but I knew that I did not want to fight. As the bullying persisted, I was forced to defend myself. Thankfully, Mr. Montalban stepped in. He understood



that he could not be in all places at once. Fights were bound to happen when he could not be there. So he did the next best thing. He taught me not only how to stand up for myself, but how to throw a punch. I found an advocate in him. He pushed me to excel academically, showing me that I could be more than my track. But the biggest gift he gave me was a love for chess. I can only speculate, but I think he wanted me to know that I did not always have to focus on my size or appearance and that I could be a strategic thinker. He treated me with love and care and allowed me to be my most vulnerable, when so many others only saw me as “Big Man.”

## My Bronx Angel

I experienced the clearest and most profound examples of love, care, and vulnerability after a traumatic event a couple of months after I was robbed of my jacket at gunpoint. One day, while on my way home from high school, I witnessed a close friend get shot and killed about 100 meters from where I was walking. For quite some time, I was terrified and scared for my own life. My fear was rooted in my connection to the victim; after all, he was my friend. But it was because I saw who shot him that I thought, *That could have been me.*

It changed everything. I avoided crowds. Never took the same way home from school. For a while, I did not want to leave my house. I was scared to open the door. When the doorbell rang, I became paranoid. Suddenly, there were people in my neighborhood I did not trust. Because the shooting took place two blocks from my home, the shooter had to know who I was, right? I started to feel secure only in the safe space of school. I took comfort in sports and cultivated my appreciation for Shakespeare (which had been sparked by my 6th grade teacher, Mrs. Losak). In school, I felt that I could be who I’d been before I witnessed my friend’s death.

It was during this time that I met Cheryl, the woman who would release me from the dread and fear that I faced daily. Cheryl worked in my neighborhood and, as luck would have it, her office was right

across the street from my apartment building. She was a community organizer and youth outreach director for the Fordham-Bedford satellite office of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition. This group supported people in the community primarily by helping them access affordable rent, but they also organized protests, worked closely with clergy, and linked young people to opportunities. Part of Cheryl's role was to put together events such as basketball games, form recreational teams, and assist young people looking for jobs and internships. I immediately took to Cheryl. She was a Black woman, short, dark-skinned, and, in her own words, "tomboy-ish." Most of the other community workers were white graduates from Fordham University, but Cheryl looked like me. She understood me.

One day, while I was sitting on my stoop, she approached me and said, "Your name is Carlos, right?" She had seen me around the neighborhood—as a 6-foot-5 15-year-old, I was hard to miss. She asked me lots of questions and eventually said, "You want to do something different? Do you want a job?" I felt like a huge load was being lifted. Someone actually *saw* me! I was being offered a way out!

You see, when Cheryl asked if I wanted to do something different, she meant something beyond hanging out and making money alongside the hustlers on my block—guys I'd grown up around but never really wanted to spend time with because of the dangers that came with their lifestyle. But with those dangers came safety as well—and at the age of 15, I had already been assaulted and robbed at gunpoint and witnessed one of my close friends being murdered. Being around these guys gave me a simulated sense of safety that I had only found at home or at school.

I took Cheryl up on her offer.

This was just before the summer of my junior year. I had never had a real job before. Cheryl helped me and some other kids from the block fill out our applications for the city's Summer Youth Employment Program. She even accompanied me and another kid from my neighborhood to Brooklyn to hand in our applications. I landed a job doing cleanup work in a park near the Bronx River. And every two

weeks, when it was time to pick up our checks, she came with us. She never sent us out on our own, as it was known that, too often, kids were being robbed of their summer youth program checks immediately after picking them up.

In my senior year of high school, when I could not work as much because of my sports commitments, Cheryl still found a way to keep me occupied. She paid me and my two best friends to do some building maintenance and cleanup at her building on Seabury Place in the South Bronx. It was in those in-between times that she really showed me what care looked like. It was in the way she would cook for and feed us; the way she taught me to embrace my Blackness, my Afro-Latinidad, and my history, which she knew better than I did; the way she lovingly and aggressively corrected my grammar. She even taught me how to play Spades—a rite of passage in the Black community. She also helped me with one essential task that my high school did not: applying to college. I had no idea what colleges were looking for, but with great patience and attention to detail, we completed my applications. Though she was not a formal teacher, she was the best educator I have ever had.

In the summer before I headed off to college, Cheryl helped me and my two best friends, Ron and Damon, get work at a Black-owned daycare in the Sedgwick Houses projects. Imagine the sight of three Black 17-year-olds, all above 6 foot 4, working with 3- to 5-year-olds! One thing stuck out to us at this daycare: we seldom saw dads picking up their children. That fact gave me pause. Cheryl noted the lack of father involvement, too, and I think that is why she placed us there. She knew we could make a difference. When I reflect on my experiences at the daycare, I often wonder how many of those 3- to 5-year-olds ever saw another Black male educator. Unbeknownst to me, Cheryl had planted a seed—one that would take some time to sprout but would eventually lead me to the classroom.

Cheryl helped to alleviate the fear and dread that I felt following my friend's death. She invested in my potential, which had been



mostly ignored in my primary and secondary schooling experiences. She guided my processing of current events taking place in our city and around the world, helped me with challenging school assignments, and reviewed my earliest writings, providing me with tremendously affirming and useful feedback. There were lessons throughout my interactions with Cheryl that I would later understand were all tied to love, care, and vulnerability.

## **My College Experience**

I knew that I would leave the Bronx and even New York one day. It had to happen. In my mind, I could not achieve all that I wanted to if I stayed in the same place. Before I was even thinking about college, I would visit my sister, her husband, and my niece and nephew at their home in Providence, Rhode Island, and think, *This is close enough, and also far enough away.*

Rhode Island was quiet, clean, and definitely *not* the Bronx. When the time came to start thinking about college, I looked to my strengths as a student-athlete to guide my decisions. While I played multiple sports, I was most passionate about basketball. I was scouted by several colleges, including Johnson & Wales University, located in Providence, which at the time was starting a Division III basketball program. Images of Providence from my time spent there came rushing back. This would be my school—where I would start my life outside New York.

As I was growing up, my parents made sure that I was deeply loved and cared for, and this love extended into my college years. I was accepted to Johnson & Wales University and received a great financial aid package, but it did not cover all my expenses, and I needed a loan to cover the remaining cost of my education. As a 17-year-old, I did not have the means to get a loan beyond my already guaranteed Stafford loans.

My father is old-school. He believes in paying for everything in cash and owing no one anything ever. I was gearing up to do some serious convincing, but I didn't have to say much. He simply said,

*“Si eso es lo que tenemos que hacer, enseñame donde tengo que firmar* (If that’s what we need to do, show me where I need to sign).” And you’d best believe, before I walked across the stage to accept my degree, my father had paid the loan off in full. I recognize what a privilege it was to have parents who were able to support me both emotionally and financially—and also that that privilege most likely came with sacrifices that, to this day, I don’t fully know about.

Growing up in the Bronx, I was almost always surrounded by predominantly Black and Latinx folks. I didn’t pay attention to my racial and ethnic identity until I went to college—the first time I was surrounded by a majority of white people. This was an adjustment, to say the least. Because of my limited interactions with white folks, many of my perceptions about them were influenced by what I saw on television. I did not know what to expect when I arrived at my college dorm and met my three white roommates.

I can vividly recall my first interaction with one of them. On move-in day, my roommate pulled me outside, away from our other roommates, to speak with me. I noticed that he was holding something in his hand, then realized it was a Confederate flag.

“Hey, I just wanted to ask, could I put this up?” he asked. “You know, my family is from the South. It is part of our heritage, and I wanted to make sure you were cool with it.”

At the time, I didn’t really understand the full gravity of the history behind that flag, so I said, “Yeah, you can put that up.” It was not until a week later, after gaining a better understanding of what the flag truly meant, that I asked him to take it down. It was an interesting moment for me, because suddenly I had to contend with what it meant to be Black in a space where no one looked like me.

I faced another shock once classes started. I very quickly learned that my New York City public education had failed to prepare me for the rigors of college. But while I had to play catch-up on an academic level, I quickly acclimated to the collegiate lifestyle. I played basketball for three years, winning several awards along the way.

I also found a brotherhood in Alpha Phi Alpha, the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity established for Black men. As a member of this esteemed fraternity, I firmly planted myself in leadership roles and, by my junior year, held leadership positions within our chapter and across the National Pan-Hellenic Council. On Sunday evenings, I cohosted *The Quiet Storm*, a radio show on Brown University's radio station, WBRU. And like many college-aged young men, I dated, eventually meeting the amazing woman I would later marry and have a brilliant and beautiful daughter with.

## Providence in the 1990s

I arrived in Providence in 1993 to find a city struggling with poverty, unemployment, poor housing, and crime. Navigating the streets from the dorm to classroom buildings and through other parts of downtown was a heart-quickenning experience.

The city recovered a bit in the mid- to late 1990s, riding the coat-tails of a national economic surge that continued right up until the 2000 stock market correction. Providence (and, really, all of Rhode Island) was usually late to the party of an economic boom and among the first to leave. Nevertheless, Providence underwent a small renaissance of its own. In 1994, the opening of Waterplace Park and the Riverwalk provided a sparkling venue for entertainment open to all.

Changes in the demographics of Providence were dramatic. While the overall population had been declining in 1990, it grew by about 8 percent in the next decade, even as the number of non-Latinx whites declined (Strongin, 2017). The composition of the city's population changed substantially and significantly. By 2000, Latinx residents represented about 30 percent of the population (Vasquez, 2003). Providence has the largest Latinx population in Rhode Island and the second largest in all of New England. Since 2000, the median income for Providence families has increased 20 percent, reversing a decline from 1990 to 2000. However, more than a quarter of the city's population continues to live below the federal poverty level, including more than 35 percent of children.

As the racial and ethnic diversity of the city's population increased, similar changes occurred in the public school system. The number of non-Latinx whites in the school population has declined since 1994, and the overall diversity of the school system has increased. Sadly, however, the number of students below the poverty level has increased dramatically; the city ranks third worst in the nation for childhood poverty (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2020).

## A Promise Kept

I graduated from college with dual degrees in business management and marketing. I promised my father when I started college that I would have a job immediately after graduating, so I accepted the first offer I received at a large national rental car company. In this role, I learned about the tenets of customer service and meeting corporate goals and expectations, which ultimately meant upselling to customers. The job emphasized the importance of relationship building and clear communication. However, in this and other early corporate jobs, I never felt encouraged or confident enough to show up with love, care, and vulnerability. In retrospect, these jobs left little room for me to discover what I was passionate about. Although I met some phenomenal people, my early professional experiences never spoke to what I believed to be my greater purpose.

Following my brief time in corporate America, I accepted an offer to join an international child sponsorship and humanitarian nonprofit organization. The offer came about as a result of reconnecting with an older fraternity brother who worked at the organization. He saw something in me that I did not recognize in myself at the time—a penchant for leadership. After all, our fraternity focused on leadership and service to our communities. I quickly began my foray into international humanitarian work. My new role focused on donor sponsorship and major and planned gifts. The organization provided underserved children and families with access to many things that we take for granted, including clean and safe drinking water, safely constructed homes, and schools. They also promoted campaigns against female genital

mutilation, anti-human trafficking initiatives, small-business incubators, and so much more. This work afforded me the opportunity to travel the world and see firsthand the importance of humanitarian efforts and the positive impact they have on individual lives. I had found *soul work*—work that was greater than myself. I came to realize that despite the challenges I encountered as a young man, I was living and beginning to thrive in an economically developed world and, comparatively speaking, had a fair amount of privilege.

In the four years I spent working for Plan International USA (formerly Childreach), I started to notice a pattern among the families in the various countries I visited. Regardless of socioeconomic circumstance, the parents almost always had a deep commitment to the education of their children. While many of the parents themselves had been unable to complete formal education, they considered it imperative that their own children engage in schooling. I realized that access to education improves socioeconomic prospects not only directly for students but for generations to come.

The late Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen asserted that access to education is essential in gaining access to other rights, as it determines human freedoms and what people can achieve in their lives (Walker, 2005). In the absence of these freedoms, individuals often remain subject to limited circumstances (Sen, 2011). It took leaving the United States for me to see that the people I encountered in the developing world were not so different from those in my hometown of the Bronx, where parents also realize the importance of education in enabling upward mobility for their children.

## **Discovering The Met and Big Picture Learning**

As my work at the international level seemed to be reaching a plateau, I felt it was time to come home and build on the foundation I'd first established in Providence. I knew I wanted to work with children and in education, but entering the teaching profession was the furthest thing from my mind. Teaching was not even a part of what

I believed to be my purpose or my life's trajectory. Upon my return to the United States, I reconnected with Danique Dolly, a dear friend from my college days. We were both sons of New York City: I attended New York City public high schools, while Danique attended Fordham Preparatory School, a private school located on Fordham University's campus. (My impression of the Fordham University campus, a mere stone's throw from my bedroom window, was of a gilded cage; I felt that the walls had been constructed to keep out people like me.)

Danique originally crossed my path while I was completing my undergraduate studies and he was completing his master's degree in teaching at Brown University. As members of different fraternities, we participated in several projects around Providence working with young people. He saw how I interacted with them and, as he often did, challenged my decision to be a business major. "We need more brothers in education," he would say. He would tell me I could make a real difference. I brushed it off at the time because I thought, *As a private school graduate, what does he know about the struggle?* I assumed that because he attended parochial and private schools, he had no clue about the challenges young people faced in the community. I was wrong. Danique's story is a powerful and beautiful one that I hope he will share widely someday.

Running into Danique after so many years was fortuitous, even if I did not see it at the time. He told me that he was teaching at an innovative school in Providence: The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (affectionately known as The Met). The Met was Big Picture Learning's founding school and where the Big Picture Learning design principles of relationships, relevance, and rigor were established. He excitedly shared that the school was a prototype and that similar schools were about to emerge all over the country. We exchanged information and went our separate ways. He subsequently called repeatedly inviting me to visit The Met; he was just as persistent as he had been in college. And I am forever grateful that he was.

When I finally did visit, I witnessed firsthand how this innovative high school was turning the schooling experience into something



I could not have imagined. What I observed were authentic relationships between adults and young people that were grounded in love. Conversations between teachers and students, between teachers and teachers, and between teachers and principals were open and honest, free of hierarchy and judgment, and focused on understanding, empowerment, and responsibility. These were people who cared more about working with young people than working the curriculum, and I thought what they were doing was extraordinary. At this point in my journey, my approach to leading with love, care, and vulnerability—*Leadership Soul*, which I will expound on in the next chapter—was far from developed, but my instincts told me that The Met was a place where I could learn and forge my stance not only as an educator but also as a leader.

Students at The Met are handed the reins of their learning experiences and are empowered to chart their trajectories. What's more, their learning is experiential: they explore powerful, real-world learning experiences through internships. I noticed how comfortable these students were in their interactions and communications with adults, whether they were familiar or not. To say I was impressed would be an understatement.

The Met was the creation of two educators, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, who came to Providence in the early 1990s to work with Ted Sizer at Brown University. Sizer was a nationally recognized leader of educational reform in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1984, he founded the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national high school transformation initiative described in *Horace's Compromise* (Sizer, 2004), a book challenging many elements of traditional high schools. Recognizing that school wasn't working for many young people, Littky and Washor challenged one another to reimagine learning experiences without regard to what most schools looked like at the time. The result was The Met, and over the last 25 years, more than 100 Big Picture Learning schools in the United States and another 100-plus around the world have formed to empower young people to create happy, successful lives of their own design.

While thoroughly impressed and excited about what I saw at The Met, I wasn't certain I could see myself in a school setting, and especially not in a classroom. To be quite honest, I'd never previously had the desire to become an educator. Growing up, Black male teachers were few and far between. None of my K–12 teachers or college professors had inspired me to want to pursue education as a possible career.

But perhaps the lack of male teachers of color had an unintended effect. Could it be that the absence of teachers I could relate to or who looked like me made me believe that the classroom was no place for an Afro-Latino man? Did students who looked like me, were raised the same way, and had similar life trajectories *need* an educator like me?

The reality is that the teaching force in the United States is overwhelmingly made up of white women. However, research confirms that teachers of color are “uniquely positioned to improve the performance of students [of color . . . by] directly or indirectly serving as role models, mentors, advocates, or cultural translators” (Egalite et al., 2015, p. 44). There continues to be a real and significant shortage of teachers of color, and in particular male teachers of color, at a time when students of color need them most. Thankfully, campaigns such as Real Men Teach and organizations like the Center for Black Educator Development have been on the rise in recent years, working to recruit and retain male teachers of color.

My introduction to The Met lit a spark in me. I felt that I'd been led to my purpose. I wanted to work with young people in ways that were transformative rather than transactional. I saw my role at The Met as not only making an impact in the lives of others but forever changing my own life as well.

## How Teaching Taught Me How to Teach

In 2002, I began my first job as an educator. I became the advisor to a group of young people—Aisha, Arthur, Ashley, Brandon, Chris, Cherolyn, Engers, Joseph, Josue, Jessica, Le'Quise, Manny, Marieli,

Micah, Odyssey, Priscilla, Rachel, and Shawn—who changed my life in many ways. Together, we began our collective and individual journeys at The Met, then in its seventh year.

While entering the classroom was certainly a big transition for me, I felt well supported by The Met and Big Picture Learning culture. I received positive feedback from my peers, who saw my leadership potential. One of my strengths was my “calming,” unflappable demeanor, which made it easy for me to work with young people. But I also attempted to bring kindness, honesty, firmness, and a commitment to continuous improvement. I had to own up to things that I did not know about myself and ask for help when I needed it. For me, the most effective way of learning how to support my students was through collaboration.

These 17 young people were my motivation. We grew and evolved together. Over the course of four years, I watched them mature, getting to know their families and their cultures, and on a deeper level, their hearts and minds. Learning alongside them while supporting them as they found their love for learning remains one of the most rewarding experiences of my career and life.

The highly personalized Big Picture Learning approach requires you to lead and learn, meaning that each student or advisee creates and receives detailed attention to their specific learning needs. This is why I know as much as I do about the circulatory system, systolic and diastolic pressures and hypertension, the culinary arts, clothing design, music production, midwifery, trans fats, early childhood and adolescent learning, computer science, architecture, computer-aided design, national abuse laws, forensics, retinopathy of prematurity, playwriting, and marine biology. These were just some of the interests my students had—and areas where they delved deeply to enhance their own learning. To support them in that learning, I needed to delve deep as well. Once students began exploring their interests, their excitement and desire to learn more was limitless, and I found

myself matching them in their excitement as we embarked on their learning journeys together. Until they joined The Met, most of these young people had found school boring and irrelevant. As we worked to cocreate and codesign their learning experiences, one of our mutually agreed-upon goals was to ensure that their time at The Met was anything but boring.

Beginning my teaching career at a Big Picture Learning school like The Met was really the only entry point into the field of education that made sense for me. I had never wanted to replicate the learning environments that I experienced growing up; I wanted more for the next generation of learners. The late bell hooks (1994) profoundly asserted that education in its purest form is a “practice of freedom”—a form of teaching and learning that is engaging and exciting for both teachers and learners. In this “practice of freedom,” both parties equally contribute to and share in the learning experience. Students are not just taught information that they are expected to commit to memory and recall when asked; they are also taught to think critically in a non-conformist, unconfined way. Adults who educate as a “practice of freedom” teach “not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our babies” (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

When students are taught in this liberatory manner, the lessons they learn carry over into their lives outside the classroom—an ever-present reminder that we are all born with an insatiable thirst to learn and grow. We are born curious, and we are excited when we discover new things. Yet somehow the way in which learning is presented makes it uncool, unexciting, and straight-up boring, often as early as grade school.

What I found at The Met was an organization and culture predicated on love, care, and vulnerability. All facets of the school—students, teachers, and administration—were guided by these principles. I felt comfortable at The Met even as I was still learning my craft. In working with students who had continuously been kept from quality, loving

opportunities and while navigating through challenging circumstances, my fellow teachers had my back and would not let me fail. I often reflect on how much I learned about love, care, and vulnerability from and with and for my colleagues. The relationships I forged at The Met stay with me even now.

## **My Leadership Responsibility Journey**

In my first roles as an advisor (2002–2006) and then principal (2006–2009), my Leadership Soul emerged. I learned that, as a leader, it is important that I adapt to whatever a situation, moment, or movement requires. And while I personally find leading from the front to be my least favorite type of leadership, I embrace it when necessary. My preference is to lead from the side, to support others along their own leadership development journey. Oftentimes, educators who have worked relentlessly in support of their students position themselves as the lone experts rather than elevating and holding up students and their accomplishments, but I find that this practice can be isolating and counterproductive.

Following my experience at The Met, I moved to the company behind the school, Big Picture Learning, where I've held several positions: director of school reform and innovation (2010–2012), national director of schools (2012–2015), and co-executive director (2015–present). Following four years with my advisory and four more as an administrator at The Met, over the subsequent decade my work shifted to focus on expanding the Big Picture Learning approach beyond Providence. I accepted the opportunity to head up expansion efforts in and around Newark, New Jersey, which, at the time, was going through its own educational transformation. The transition from principal and assistant district director made sense for me at the time for a number of reasons. First, it was time for me to return to the New York City area to be closer to my family. Second, I was seeking professional advancement and wanted to apply what I'd learned from my previous roles to creating more systemic change, including

by advising the mayor of Newark's team regarding matters of education. And third, I wanted to help grow Big Picture Learning schools in Newark and throughout New Jersey.

Though still part of the Big Picture Learning national organization, I found myself working independently for the first time. Sure, I still benefited from working closely with Elliot and learning alongside him. But I didn't have a physical office to go into every day, so I needed to develop discipline to work alone. I had to do a lot of preparatory work in advance of meetings to understand the city's rich history and the plethora of nuanced alliances and relationships that existed among the city's key decision makers.

In most cases, I had neither formal authority nor control; I was merely an intermediary. I could only effect change in practice and pedagogy up to a certain point. I had to learn how to be a beneficial partner in a large school district. There were times I had to shift and pivot, such as when a new leadership team unceremoniously shut down a multiyear school startup project that I had been asked to initiate. Yet I was also able to be directly involved in systems-level change in a high-profile district heavily influenced by outside philanthropy. I learned that alliances can, if cultivated appropriately, be leveraged later. Many of the folks I connected with in Newark continue to be collaborative partners on a national level to this day.

I was invited to take on the role of national director of schools in 2012. The position allowed me to apply skills I had honed at a regional level—relationship building chief among them—and applied them to expanding Big Picture Learning—not just by starting new schools but also by helping existing schools in our burgeoning network continue to refine their practices to benefit students, families, and communities across the country.

Over my time at The Met and then in Newark, I built relationships with principals across the country and periodically facilitated coaching and development with select schools in the network. As in my previous roles, my leadership was embraced by former colleagues



in truly powerful ways. I had the backing of my predecessor, Kari Thierer, who was kind and supportive in my transition, allowing me to reach out to her for advice and periodically check in as I settled into the role. I still interacted with district leaders and philanthropic organizations, but now I was equipped with a more specific understanding of the challenges and opportunities they identified as they worked within their districts to launch new innovative schools.

Early on, Big Picture Learning founders Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor committed to hiring and elevating people from the communities they were serving. This was as true at the executive director level as it was at the advisor level. Dennis and Elliot were among my primary supporters, and they prepared me to take on various leadership roles as time went on.

I learned a lot through trial and error when I first became co-executive director, but I am fortunate to have entered into this role with longtime friend and colleague Andrew Frishman, a fellow advisor at The Met, who is one of the brightest and most thoughtful leaders I've had the pleasure of working alongside. The transition was also facilitated by a tremendous board of directors who understood the importance and complexity of a successful succession.

On a personal level, the executive director role requires an amount of travel that forced me—for the first time—to take a hard look at work-life balance. I took on the responsibility of coordinating and establishing the growth of our national programmatic team by conceptualizing and launching our regional structure, which included the addition of regional directors, many of whom later ascended to the national leadership team.

So far in my professional career, I have been blessed by working with remarkable individuals who, without ever thinking about it, embrace Leadership Soul and infuse love, care, and vulnerability into their relationships. The Met and Big Picture Learning powerfully embody Leadership Soul throughout a school's design and operation.

## Sharing My Leadership Journey

Most of what I know about leadership—its purpose, principles, and practices—I learned from my parents, my family, and close connections in our community. Again and again throughout my career, I have relearned what they taught me. My focus on love, care, and vulnerability, forged in childhood, has formed the foundation of my own leadership with and through others, particularly the young people I have had the privilege to know and serve.

In this book, I share my leadership and teaching experiences with three young men: Josue, Angel, and Shawn. These young men left indelible marks on my leadership journey. I experienced many of my firsts with them, and they helped me learn how to truly teach, lead, and serve. Letters written to these former students and their family members form the centerpiece of my narrative; for me, sharing them is the ultimate act of vulnerability. As with the letter to my younger self at the start of this book, these letters offer me the opportunity to share thoughts I couldn't express at the time because I didn't have the experience, language, foresight or, in some cases, courage to do so.

## Why These Stories?

In Ghana, the Akan people have a word in the Twi language—*sankofa*—that literally means “to go back and get it.” The term refers to bringing forward what is at risk of being left behind. Implicit to the concept of *sankofa* is the idea that the past is a guide to the future. I could not leave the memory of Josue, Angel, and Shawn behind. I wanted to write a book to honor them. Their stories have remained with me, and I often find myself thinking about their experiences and our relationships. Although they are no longer with us, they were all uniquely talented, compassionate, brilliant, sharp, and tremendous human beings. Through their stories, I hope to draw out what I have learned from knowing them and working with them and reflect on the passions that they possessed.

My goal as an education leader has been constant: to lift up and center the best interests of the young people we serve. When I began teaching at The Met, I hoped that my presence would make a positive impact on the education experiences of my students. I soon realized that these young people would in turn have a tremendous impact on my own learning and development as an educator, leader, and parent.

Welcome to *Leadership Soul*.

# References

---

- Alder, N. (2002). Interpretations of the meaning of care: Creating caring relationships in urban middle school classrooms. *Urban Education*, 37(2), 241–266.
- Anderson, G. L. (1990). Toward a critical constructivist approach to school administration: Invisibility, legitimation, and the study of non-events. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 26(1), 38–59.
- Banda, R., Reyes, G., & Caldas, B. (2020). Curricula of care and radical love. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1434
- Bass, L. (2012). When care trumps justice: The operationalization of Black feminist caring in educational leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(1), 73–87.
- Bass, L. R. (2020). Black male leaders care too: An introduction to Black masculine caring in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 56(3), 353–395.
- Bass, L., & Alston, K. (2018). Black masculine caring and the dilemma faced by Black male leaders. *Journal of School Leadership*, 28(6), 772–787.
- Bond, M. J., & Herman, A. A. (2016). Lagging life expectancy for Black men: A public health imperative. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(7), 1167–1169. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4984780/>
- Brantmeier, E. J. (2013). Pedagogy of vulnerability: Definitions, assumptions, and applications. In J. Lin, R. Oxford, & E. J. Brantmeier (Eds.), *Re-envisioning higher education: Embodied pathways to wisdom and transformation* (pp. 95–106). Information Age Publishing.

- Brockenbrough, E. (2015). "The discipline stop": Black male teachers and the politics of urban school discipline. *Education and Urban Society*, 47(5), 499–522.
- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to lead: Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts.* Random House.
- Burton, L. (2007). Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model. *Family Relations*, 56(4), 329–345.
- Byrne-Jiménez, M. C., & Yoon, I. H. (2019). Leadership as an act of love: Leading in dangerous times. *Frontiers in Education*, 3. doi:10.3389/educ.2018.00117
- Callahan, A. (2020, June 10). *Why Black male teachers matter.* American Federation of Teachers. <https://www.aft.org/news/why-black-male-teachers-matter>
- Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of Black feminist thought. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(4), 745–773.
- Collins, P. H. (2002). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* Routledge.
- Cross, N. (2020). What's going right? Language play and bilingual identities in a predominantly African American dual-language classroom. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 17. <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/volume-17-spring-2020/what%E2%80%99s-going-right-language-play-and-bilingual-identities-predominantly>
- Dancy, T. E. (2014). The adultification of Black Boys. In K. J. Fasching-Varner, R. E. Reynolds, K. A. Albert, & L. L. Martin (Eds.), *Trayvon Martin, race, and American justice: Writing wrong* (vol. 1, pp. 49–56). Sense Publishers.
- Daniels, E. A. (2012). *Fighting, loving, teaching: An exploration of hope, armed love and critical urban pedagogies.* Sense Publishers.
- Dantley, M. E. (2009). African American educational leadership: Critical, purposive, and spiritual. In L. Foster & L. C. Tillman (Eds.), *African American perspectives on leadership in schools: Building a culture of empowerment* (pp. 39–56). Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.* New Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* D. C. Heath.
- Diaz, R. (2011). Historical images of Puerto Ricans: The case of the South Bronx. *Transforming Anthropology*, 19(1), 53–57.
- DoSomething.org. (2023). *11 facts about high school dropout rates.* <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-high-school-dropout-rates>
- Duncan-Andrade, J. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 181–194.

- Egalite, A. J., Kisida, B., & Winters, M. A. (2015). Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement. *Economics of Education Review*, 45, 44–52.
- Emdin, C. (2022). *Keynote address*. Big Picture Learning Annual Summer Conference, Hollywood, FL.
- Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students*. Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
- Estrada, P. (2014). English learner curricular streams in four middle schools: Triage in the trenches. *The Urban Review*, 46(4), 535–573.
- Fergus, A. (2010). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of Black masculinity*. University of Michigan Press.
- Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*. Greenwood.
- Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G., Gardiner, B., & Jost, T. M. (2022). *The state of preschool 2021: State preschool yearbook*. National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University. [https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/YB2021\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/YB2021_Full_Report.pdf)
- Gandara, P., Rumberger, R., Maxwell-Jolly, J., & Callahan, R. (2003). English learners in California schools: Unequal resources, unequal outcomes. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 11, 36.
- Ginwright, S. (2006). Racial justice through resistance: Important dimensions of youth development for African Americans. *National Civic Review*, 95(1), 41–46.
- Gonzalez, E. (2004). *The Bronx*. Columbia University Press.
- Greene, M. (1978). Teaching: The personal reality. *Teachers College Record*, 80(1), 24–35. doi:10.1177/016146817808000102
- Guinier, L. (2016). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America*. Penguin Random House.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., & Orellana, M. F. (2006). At last: The “problem” of English learners: Constructing genres of difference. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 40(4), 502–507.
- Heiser, C. A., Prince, K., & Levy, J. D. (2017). Examining critical theory as a framework to advance equity through student affairs assessment. *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, 2(1), 1–17.
- hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Hoyle, J. R., & Slater, R. O. (2001). Love, happiness, and America’s schools: The role of educational leadership in the 21st century. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(10), 790–794.



- Hurtado, A., Haney, C. W., & Hurtado, J. G. (2012). "Where the boys are": Macro and micro considerations for the study of young Latino men's educational achievement. In P. A. Noguera, A. Hurtado, & E. Fergus (Eds.), *Invisible no more: Understanding the disenfranchisement of Latino men and boys* (pp. 101–121). Taylor & Francis Group.
- Jackson, I., Sealey-Ruiz, Y., & Watson, W. (2014). Reciprocal love: Mentoring Black and Latino males through an ethos of care. *Urban Education, 49*(4), 394–417.
- Kanno, Y., & Kangas, S. E. (2014). "I'm not going to be, like, for the AP": English language learners' limited access to advanced college-preparatory courses in high school. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(5), 848–878.
- Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 1272–1311.
- Kwenda, C. V. (2003). Cultural justice: The pathway to reconciliation and social cohesion. In D. Chidester, P. Dexter, & W. James (Eds.), *What holds us together: Social cohesion in South Africa* (pp. 67–80). HSRC Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher, 35*(7), 3–12.
- Larson, C. L., & Murtadha, K. (2002). Leadership for social justice. *Teachers College Record, 104*(9), 134–161.
- Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Mahler, J. (2006). *Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning: 1977, baseball, politics, and the battle for the soul of a city*. Macmillan.
- Maslow, A. H. (1963). The need to know and the fear of knowing. *Journal of General Psychology, 68*(1), 111–125. doi:10.1080/00221309.1963.9920516
- Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.
- Miller, P. M., Brown, T., & Hopson, R. (2011). Centering love, hope, and trust in the community: Transformative urban leadership informed by Paulo Freire. *Urban Education, 46*(5), 1078–1099.
- Murtadha, K., & Watts, D. M. (2005). Linking the struggle for education and social justice: Historical perspectives of African American leadership in schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 41*(4), 591–608.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023, May). Racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools. *Condition of education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge/racial-ethnic-enrollment>

- National Partnership for Women & Families. (2018). *Listening to Latina mothers in California*. <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/health-care/maternity/listening-to-latina-mothers-in-california.pdf>
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education*. Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2013). An ethic of caring. In R. Shafer-Landau (Ed.), *Ethical theory: An anthology* (2nd ed., pp. 699–712). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Noguera, P. A. (2012). Saving Black and Latino boys: What schools can do to make a difference. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(5), 8–12.
- Noguera, P., Hurtado, A., & Fergus, E. (Eds.). (2012). *Invisible no more: Understanding the disenfranchisement of Latino men and boys*. Routledge.
- Orfield, G., Kuscera, J., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2012). *E pluribus . . . separation: Deepening double segregation for more students*. Civil Rights Project UCLA.
- P, K. (2020, December 5). *23 college dropout statistics that will surprise you*. CreditDonkey. <https://www.creditdonkey.com/college-dropout-statistics.html>
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. (2020). *New census data shows: Rhode Island ranked 21st in child poverty*. [https://www.rikidscount.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Media%20Releases/9.17.20%20Media%20Release%20-%20Child%20Poverty\\_2019%20-%20final.pdf](https://www.rikidscount.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Media%20Releases/9.17.20%20Media%20Release%20-%20Child%20Poverty_2019%20-%20final.pdf)
- Ricciulli, V. (2019, May 3). *In the 1970s, the Bronx was burning, but some residents were rebuilding*. Curbed New York. <https://ny.curbed.com/2019/5/3/18525908/south-bronx-fires-decade-of-fire-vivian-vazquez-documentary>
- Rivera-McCutchen, R. L. (2012). Caring in a small urban high school: A complicated success. *Urban Education*, 47(3), 653–680.
- Rivera-McCutchen, R. L. (2019). Armed love in school leadership: Resisting inequality and injustice in schooling. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 18(2), 237–247.
- Schein, E., & Schein, P. (2018). *Humble leadership: The power of relationships, openness, and trust* (Kindle ed.). Berrett-Koehler.
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2015). *Black lives matter: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males*. [https://schottfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/blacklivesmatter2015\\_0.pdf](https://schottfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/blacklivesmatter2015_0.pdf)
- Sen, A. (2011). *Development as freedom*. Knopf Doubleday.
- Siddle Walker, V., & Snarey, J. R. (Eds.). (2004). *Race-ing moral formation: African American perspectives on care and justice*. Teachers College Press.

- Sizer, T. R. (2004). *Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school: With a new preface*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Sizer, T. R. (2009). *I cannot teach a child I do not know*. Speech delivered at the Australian National Schools Network.
- Strongin, F. F. V. (2017). *"You don't have a problem, until you do": Revitalization and gentrification in Providence, Rhode Island* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).
- Taylor, J. K. (2020). Structural racism and maternal health among Black women. *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 48(3), 506–517.
- Umansky, I. M., & Dumont, H. (2021). English learner labeling: How English learner classification in kindergarten shapes teacher perceptions of student skills and the moderating role of bilingual instructional settings. *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(5), 993–1031.
- Vasquez, D. W. (2003). Latinos in Rhode Island.
- Walker, M. (2005). Amartya Sen's capability approach and education. *Educational Action Research*, 13(1), 103–110.
- Werner, C. (2004). *Higher ground: Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the rise and fall of American soul*. Crown Publishers.
- Wright, B. L., & Ford, D. Y. (2019). Remixing and reimagining the early childhood school experiences of brilliant Black boys. *Boyhood Studies*, 12(1), 17–37.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
- Zinn, D., Proteus, K., & Keet, A. (2009). Mutual vulnerability: A key principle in a humanising pedagogy in post-conflict societies. *Perspectives in Education*, 27(2), 109–119.

# Index

---

The letter *f* following a page number denotes a figure.

- achievement gap, 47, 50
- adultification, 1, 10
- armed love, 48
- behaviors, deimatic, xx
- Big Picture Learning, 20–26, 36, 40–42, 87–88
- Black children
  - discipline rates, 33
  - preschoolers, high-quality education, 33
- Black/Latina women, childbirth experience, 6
- Black/Latino boys
  - academic inequalities, 33
  - adultification of, 33
  - assumptions regarding, xx, 6
  - deficit narrative, changing the, 38
  - demographics, 6
  - discipline rates, 33
  - graduation statistics, 33
  - marginalization of, 31–32
  - research grouping, 32–33
  - stereotyping of, 10
  - teaching vulnerability to, xix–xx
- Black/Latinx educational leaders, historically, 33–34
- Black/Latinx students
  - education gap, 30
  - leading, 38
  - systemic racism, intergenerational effects, 38–39
- Black/Latinx teachers, dual roles of, 37
- Black masculine caring (BMC)
  - framework, 50–51
- Black men, 6, 33, 45
- Black women teachers, 49–50
- boys, Black/Latino
  - academic inequalities, 33
  - adultification of, 33
  - assumptions regarding, xx, 6
  - deficit narrative, changing the, 38
  - demographics, 6
  - discipline rates, 33

- graduation statistics, 33
- marginalization of, 31–32
- research grouping, 32–33
- stereotyping of, 10
- teaching vulnerability to, xix–xx
- Bronx, the
  - 1960s–1980s, 7–8
  - schools, 6
  - Summer Youth Employment Program, 12–13
- care
  - benefits of, 53
  - leadership through, 35, 36, 41–42, 49–51, 97–98
- caring without love, 36
- children, Black. *See also* boys, Black/Latino
  - discipline rates, 33
  - preschoolers, high-quality education, 33
- community, building, 40
- critical theory, Leadership Soul and, 47–53
- cultural justice, 51
- curriculum, lived, 52
- deimatic behaviors, xx
- discipline, 33, 45
- dropout statistics, 30
- education
  - access to, importance of, 18
  - critical vs. conventional, 37–42
  - goals of, xvii
  - practice of freedom, 23
- education debt, 47
- education system, failures, 30–32
- educational leaders, Black/Latinx, historically, 33–34
- empowerment, vulnerability and, 52
- English learners (ELs), framing, 9
- ethic of care, 49–50
- Gooding, Shawn, 76–86
- graduation statistics, 30
- growth tenet of Leadership Soul, 90
- higher education, dropout statistics, 30
- Innervisions* (Stevie Wonder), xix
- intentionality, acting with, 38
- intimacy tenet of Leadership Soul, 90
- Latinos, Black/Latino. *See also* boys, Black/Latino; students, Black/Latinx; women, Black/Latina
- leader, defined, 46
- leadership. *See also under* Moreno, Carlos
  - aspiration to, xvii
  - Black/Latinx, historically, 33–34
  - culturally responsive, 91
  - in education, xvii–xix, 33–34
  - natural, 62
  - power and, xviii
  - purpose of, 34, 62
  - in schools, xix, 39–40
  - soul-centered, importance of, xix
  - takeaways on, 84–86
  - vulnerability and, 98–100
- Leadership Soul
  - care component, 35, 36, 41–42, 49–51, 97–98
  - core tenets, 90
  - critical theory and, 47–53
  - defined, 34–35
  - essential practices for developing, 87–88
  - heart of, 100–101
  - importance of, xix
  - love component, 35–36, 41–42, 48–49, 92, 95–96
  - from the margins to the center, 101–102
  - Moreno, Carlos, 24, 42, 102–103

- Leadership Soul (*Cont'd*)
  - requirements, 100
  - vulnerability component, 35, 37, 41–42, 51–53, 98–100
- learning
  - changing the context for, 88–91
  - demonstrating, 42
- learning environment, safe and supportive, 53
- leave to learn, 42
- León, Angel, 65–75
- lived curriculum, 52
- love
  - armed, 48
  - benefits of, 53
  - caring without, 36
  - cultivating relationships with, 91–93
  - leadership through, 35–36, 41–42, 48–49, 92, 95–96
  - reciprocal, 49
  - vulnerability guided by, 37
- men, Black, 6, 33, 45
- meritocracy, myth of, 31
- Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (The Met), 19–24, 26, 36, 40–42
- Morales, Josue, 54–64
- Morales, Rosa, letter to, 54–57
- Moreno, Carlos
  - adultification of, 1, 10
  - appearance, 7, 9, 10
  - career, 13, 18–24, 40–41
  - care experienced by, 13–15
  - characteristics, 21
  - college experience, 14–17
  - education, 9–11
  - employment, 12–13, 17–18
  - identity, 8–9, 15
  - leader, approach to role as, 46
  - leadership and leaders, interest in, 29–30
  - leadership background, 16, 17
  - leadership responsibility journey, 24–27
  - Leadership Soul, 24, 42, 102–103
  - life goals, 7, 18–19
  - life in the Bronx, 7–11
  - soul work, 18
  - sports, 14–15
  - student relationships, 40
  - trauma experienced by, 1, 4–5, 11, 12
- Moreno, Carlos, letters
  - Angelis León (Angel's daughter), 65–67
  - Isabella Moreno, 108–110
  - Michael Walters, 104–107
  - Rosa Morales (Josue's mom), 54–57
  - Shawn Gooding, 76–79
  - to younger self, 1–3
- Moreno, Isabella, letter to, 108–110
- openness, vulnerability is, 37
- opportunity gap, 50
- pain, dirty, 5
- power
  - leadership and, xvii
  - stereotyping and, 51
  - to youth, xvii–xx
- preschoolers, Black, high-quality education, 33
- Providence, RI, 14, 16–17
- purpose tenet of Leadership Soul, 90
- purposeful, becoming, 38
- racism, intergenerational effects of systemic, 38–39
- radical vulnerability, xix
- reciprocal love, 49
- reflection, 87–88
- relationship-building, 61–62, 91–93
- sankofa*, 27
- savior complex, 45–46



- school leadership
  - culturally responsive, 39–40
  - work of, xix
- segregation in schools, 32
- self-care tenet of Leadership Soul, 90
- service, care is, 36
- soul awakening, activating, xix
- soul-centered leadership, importance of, xix
- South Bronx, 8
- stereotyping, power and, 51
- students
  - leave to learn, 42
  - oppression of minority, 37–38
  - strengths, focusing on, 41–42
- students, Black/Latinx. *See also* boys, Black/Latino
  - education gap, 30
  - leading, 38
  - preschoolers, high-quality education, 33
  - systemic racism, intergenerational effects, 38–39
- students, marginalized
  - deficit view of, 31–32
  - developing trust, 48
  - labeling of, 47
- teachers
  - being liked vs. being loved, 39–40
  - Black, shortage of, 21
  - Black/Latinx, and male, 34
  - Black/Latinx, dual roles of, 37
  - Black men, historically, 45
  - Black women, 49–50
  - of color, benefits of, 21
  - demographics, 6
  - savior complex, 45–46
- tough love, xx
- trauma, 1, 4–5, 11, 12
- trust, building, 40, 48
- vulnerability
  - in cultural justice, 51
  - leadership through, 35, 37, 41–42, 51–53, 98–100
  - mutual, 51
  - takeaways on, 84–86
  - teaching, xix–xx
- Walters, Michael, letter to, 104–107
- whole student focus, 41
- women, Black/Latina, childbirth experience, 6
- women educators, Black, 49–50
- Wonder, Stevie, xix

# About the Author

---



**Carlos R. Moreno** has been a teacher, a principal, and a director, and is now an executive director. A proud native New Yorker, Carlos is a passionate educational trailblazer committed to supporting school and district leaders to create high-quality, innovative schools designed to tackle systemic equity issues. He currently serves as co-executive

director for Big Picture Learning, a nonprofit organization that has developed more than 200 such schools in the United States and around the world. He cofounded and leads the Deeper Learning Equity Fellowship, in partnership with the Internationals Network for Public Schools, and the newly created Ashé Leaders Fellowship. Carlos is also the founder and coproducer of the highly acclaimed Leadership Journeys storytelling initiative, which has featured inspirational figures such as Christopher Emdin, Dena Simmons, Kaya Henderson, Nancy Gutiérrez, Meisha Porter, Bettina Love, and Sharif El-Mekki. Carlos holds undergraduate degrees in marketing and business and a master's degree in educational leadership.

But those are merely Carlos's credentials. At heart, Carlos is an observer, a family man, a learner, a builder of community, a student, and a teacher—someone who has simultaneously found and continues to seek his own Leadership Soul.