

Navigating Advocacy and Ethics: Social Justice Educational Leaders' Perspectives

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Abstract

Equity and inclusion efforts have increased at educational institutions in the United States. However, equity and inclusion leadership has been fraught with political challenges, as well as a lack of resources, clear strategic direction, and campus support and engagement. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study aimed to examine the lived experiences of educators and leaders working for social justice in educational contexts in the United States. The researchers interviewed seven participants, focusing on the research question: How do educational leaders describe the ways they navigate the ethical dimensions of advocacy? The researchers underpinned their analysis using a conceptual framework based on established frameworks for social justice leadership and Critical Race Theory; both emphasize contextual analysis and seek to challenge systemic inequities. The researchers used an inductive and iterative process that produced the following emergent theme: leaders' development of frameworks for advocacy and ethics as they pursue social justice goals. The results suggest specific leadership strategies useful to educational leaders, such as communication, relationship-building, and ethical advocacy for their contexts.

Keywords: social justice leadership, qualitative, multi-institutional, advocacy, Critical Race Theory, inequity, leadership frameworks

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, equity and inclusion efforts have increased at U.S. educational institutions as schools and other organizations continue to grapple with issues of marginalization and inequality (Barnett, 2020; Murphy, 2016). Social justice leadership has been fraught with political challenges: lack of resources, clear strategic direction, and campus support and engagement. Cultural wars have ensued nationally that question even using equity and inclusion terminology. Recent research has highlighted the importance of social justice educational leadership (SJEL) in addressing issues of inequity and marginalization in schools. For example, Lash and Sanchez (2022) emphasized the need for educational leaders to adopt an equity-focused leadership approach that centers on social justice principles. Similarly, Óskarsdóttir et al. (2021) described the role of educational leaders in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments for diverse student populations. These studies underscore the issue of leaders' roles in promoting equity and inclusion in schools and highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how leaders navigate advocacy and ethics in their work.

In this qualitative research study, we sought to explore how educational leaders, identified for their engagement in social justice leadership, described their social justice leadership work. Through interviews with educational leaders, we aimed to gain insights into their perspectives on social justice leadership and their strategies for addressing systemic marginalization in their contexts. This qualitative study was framed by the concept of social justice leadership. More recently, there is a body of work addressing social justice leadership in education (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; DeMatthews et al., 2015; Goldfarb & Grineberg, 2002; Gray & Mendoza-Reis, 2021; Theoharis, 2007; Torrance et al., 2021). Lowery (2022) argued that social justice leadership entails creating a school culture that values diversity and challenges systemic inequalities. Similarly, Rivera-McCutchen (2014) emphasized the role of social justice leadership in fostering equitable access to educational resources and opportunities. These studies highlight the growing recognition of social justice leadership's significance as a conceptual and practical framework for promoting inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Literature Review

Promoting equity and inclusion in education is a complex and challenging task that requires sustained effort and commitment. As Bogotch (2002) noted, there can be no fixed meaning of social justice; thus, there can be no fixed plans for reform. Educational leadership must continually redefine and critique reform efforts within the changing context of their educational landscape and social justice itself. However, the political climate and other internal and external factors can create significant challenges for equity and inclusion leaders and advocates. Moreover, the literature on a myriad of equity and inclusion topics within the field of education has grown over the last two decades, particularly in the U.S. The research has focused on the challenges equity and inclusion advocates and leaders face and on the promotion of social justice and equity, particularly for marginalized students (Aniscow, 2020; Carrington & Andrews, 2022).

Equity and Inclusion Work in Education

Many scholars have described equity and inclusion work's theoretical and practical implications within schools, colleges, and universities. Bell (1992) argued that educational institutions reflect society's values, beliefs, and power structures. Bell noted that educational institutions have historically been exclusionary towards people of color and provided a framework for understanding critical race theory, which explores how racism is systemic in educational institutions. In a study on equity in schools, Rogers (2021) noted that equitable education requires a shift in focus from achievement gaps to systemic oppression and called for educational institutions to engage in anti-oppression work and examine the role of power and privilege in educational settings. Kumashiro (2000) argued that the language of diversity in educational settings often hides issues of power and privilege and that educational institutions should engage in critical pedagogy, which examines how power and privilege operate in educational settings and work toward equity and social justice. Similarly, Theoharis (2007) examined the role of social justice leadership in schools and argued that social justice leaders should address issues of race, class, gender, disability, and sexual orientation in their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision.

In a study on equity and inclusion in higher education, Chun and Evans (2018) examined the role of institutional leadership in promoting equity and inclusion. Chun and Evans noted that institutional leaders should engage in anti-oppression work, develop a strategic plan for equity and inclusion, and foster a culture of inclusion. Kezar and Eckel (2002) argued that such leaders should prioritize diversity and inclusivity while also engaging in critical self-reflection and challenging institutional structures and practices that perpetuate inequity. However, MacDonald (2023) found that reflection alone is insufficient for social justice pursuits. Without critical reflexivity to understand how self-reflection is still socially constructed, leaders can perpetuate symbolic violence and reproduce the disadvantages that they seek to reform.

Social Justice Leadership in Education

Social justice leadership speaks directly to understanding the characteristics and actions of a leader as they pursue social justice goals for their context (DeMatthews et al., 2015). Social justice leadership is defined “as the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (Goldfarb & Grineberg, 2002, p. 163). Social justice leadership theory centers equity in terms of deconstructing policies and procedures that create obstacles for student populations being pushed to the margins. While focusing on the ethical, moral, and humanistic values of social justice, leaders must also recognize the impact of culture and history on school systems while pursuing substantive changes (DeMatthews et al., 2015). Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leadership as the leader making “issue(s) of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). This definition centers on “addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools” (p. 239).

The Political Climate's Impact on Equity and Inclusion Work

The political climate can significantly impact the work of equity and inclusion leaders and advocates in education (Hayter & Cahoy, 2018). In recent years, politics and policies have impacted equity and inclusion efforts at educational institutions. The Supreme Court recently ruled that many colleges and universities' affirmative action admissions policies are unconstitutional, and higher education scholars have begun discussing the implications of this decision for many fields such as medicine and other healthcare fields (Aaron et al., 2023). As another example, according to Hess and McAvoy (2015), political pressures and policies have led to the narrowing of the curriculum and a focus on standardized testing, which can be detrimental to equity and inclusion efforts. Political polarization and divisiveness also make it difficult to build consensus around equity and inclusion issues (Hermann, 2023). The recent polarization and politicization of Critical Race Theory have been used to pass educational gag-order legislation in 18 states, banning any discussion of the intentionally broad idea of divisive concepts, further complicating any equity and inclusion effort termed as such (Schwartz, 2023).

Other Factors Impacting Equity and Inclusion Work

In addition to political influences, there are several internal and external pressures and factors that can create challenges for equity and inclusion leaders and advocates. For example, according to Shah et al. (2023), one of the most significant challenges faced by equity and inclusion leaders and advocates is resistance to change. Resistance can come from various sources, including colleagues, parents, and community members. Additionally, Kluch et al. (2022) found that a lack of resources, including funding, time, and staff, can create significant challenges for equity and inclusion efforts in education. These challenges can be particularly acute for under-resourced schools and districts (Adams, 2023; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

Over the last twenty years, several models and theoretical frameworks for social justice leadership have been proposed. Goldfarb and Grineberg (2002) defined social justice leadership as the exercise of altering institutional and organizational arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions. In a study on social justice leadership in education, DeMathews and Mawhinney (2014) explored the characteristics and actions of social justice leaders. They contended that social justice leaders should recognize the impact of culture and history on school systems while pursuing substantive changes that address marginalization in schools. Torrance et al. (2021) provided a framework for understanding social justice leadership in schools, noting that social justice leaders should focus on the ethical, moral, and humanistic values of social justice and center equity in terms of deconstructing policies and procedures that create obstacles for student populations being pushed to the margins. Sarid (2021) proposed a multidimensional social justice educational leadership (SJEL) framework with transformative leadership as its basis. Sarid argued that SJEL should exist on a continuum with individual accountability on one end and social equality on the other. Each end of the continuum is necessary for SJEL. The struggle is for leaders to create

a balance between the two. Furman (2012) concluded that many educational leadership preparation programs do not sufficiently address essential capacities for social justice leadership, such as leadership praxis. Furman's proposed framework details social justice leadership capacities and ways educational leadership preparation programs might be designed to facilitate the better development of these capacities. Similarly, Lowery (2019) synthesized existing social justice leadership frameworks to develop a framework for educational leadership preparation programs to foster courage for justice work in educational settings.

Several scholars have discussed ethical frameworks for social justice leadership, which align with our study's findings related to communication, advocacy, and relationship-building. Gray and Mendoza-Reis (2021) and Mendoza-Reis and Flores (2014) introduced a tri-level framework for social justice leadership in schools with multilingual learners. The framework consists of three levels: institutional, pedagogical, and personal. At the institutional level, leaders are encouraged to identify and address structural barriers, advocating for policies that disrupt inequities. The pedagogical level emphasizes administrators' deep understanding of content knowledge relevant to multilingual learners, including culturally sustaining practices, language acquisition theories, and socio-political factors. The personal level focuses on leaders' ideological clarity, prompting them to critically examine their beliefs and challenge societal norms perpetuating inequality. The framework underscores the importance of moral courage, integrity, collaboration, and genuine engagement with parents to foster a nurturing and inclusive learning environment for an increasingly diverse student population. Similarly, Niesche and Keddie (2016) developed an ethical framework of social justice leadership based on Foucault's (2011) and Anderson's (2009) work, emphasizing the concepts of truth-telling, advocacy, and counter-conduct. Niesche and Keddie found that the social justice leaders they interviewed took risks, saw it as their duty to speak the truth, faced criticism for their social justice work, advocated consistently for marginalized groups, and engaged in counter-conduct as a form of resistance to oppressive elements in their contexts.

Critical Race Theory and Social Justice Leadership

Other scholars have explored the intersection of social justice leadership and Critical Race Theory. For example, Khushal (2022), Edirmanasinghe et al. (2022), Khalifa et al. (2016) examined how social justice leaders can use critical approaches such as Critical Race Theory to disrupt dominant narratives and challenge systemic racism in schools. Similarly, Forman et al. (2022) contended that social justice leadership requires a critical consciousness that acknowledges the historical and social contexts of oppression. Critical Race Theory's principles, as developed by Crenshaw et al. (1995) and Delgado and Stefancic (1998), are applicable to this analysis, such as counter-storying telling, social justice and activism, social constructions of race, and intersectionality. Participant's stories provide counter-narratives to dominant discourses about equity and inclusion efforts in schools with a focus not on politics but rather on serving all students effectively. Constructions of the equity and inclusion leader as a person of color are writ large in these narratives, as all the participants are people of color. This also reflects the significant labor imposed upon marginalized populations to effect change for more equitable educational environments. All the participants discuss their work in relation to their

identities as people of color, reflecting the intersections between their work and what they believe to be essential elements of their identities. Intersectionality theory, developed by Crenshaw (2017), highlights how multiple social identities intersect and interact, leading to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It emphasizes the agency of individuals and communities in recognizing and addressing intersecting systems of power and inequality. The use of Critical Race Theory and social justice leadership theories as a guiding conceptual framework provides this qualitative study with a solid foundation to analyze the data.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of educators and leaders working for social justice in educational contexts in the United States. The central research question was the following: How do educational leaders describe the ways they navigate the ethical dimensions of advocacy? In this study, educational leaders' experiences in navigating the ethical dimensions of advocacy are complex and multifaceted, and a qualitative phenomenological approach enables the researchers to capture the depth and intricacy of these experiences. The choice of a qualitative phenomenological approach is vital for this study as it allows researchers to uncover the essence of educational leaders' experiences, explore their interpretations and ethical frameworks, consider contextual factors, and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. This approach aligns perfectly with the research's aim to provide a deep and meaningful understanding of how educators and leaders work for social justice in educational contexts.

Research Design

Phenomenology lends itself to the study of lived experiences and to discovering the “essence” of these experiences. Phenomenology is a philosophy and methodological approach centered on the perceptions and emotions of participants. The approach focuses, as mentioned, on how participants live experiences and not just their reactions to experiences (Connelly, 2010; Munhall, 2007). Specifically, this study utilized interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, developed by Heidegger (1988). At the core of interpretive phenomenology is the belief that our understanding of the world is shaped by our subjective experiences and interpretations. Heidegger argued that human existence is fundamentally intertwined with the world, and our experiences are not isolated events but are embedded in a broader context. Therefore, to truly grasp the meaning of human existence, one must engage in a process of interpretation and understanding. Interpretive phenomenology emphasizes the importance of context and the hermeneutic circle, which is the idea that we understand individual experiences by considering their relation to the larger whole and vice versa (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). We recognize that our interpretations are influenced by our preconceptions, biases, and cultural backgrounds. For our study's purposes, interpretive phenomenology is effective because it involves studying individuals' lived experiences and attempting to comprehend the meanings they assign to those experiences. Accordingly, we immersed ourselves in the participants' worlds, seeking to capture the essence of their experiences through in-depth interviews. The goal of interpretive phenomenology, which is what our conclusions suggest, is not to generalize

or establish universal laws but to gain insight into the unique subjective perspectives and meanings constructed by individuals.

Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection methods employed in this qualitative phenomenological study primarily involved in-depth interviews with the participants. Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method due to their ability to provide rich, in-depth insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of educational leaders working for social justice in educational contexts in the United States. Interviews allow participants to share their narratives, beliefs, and experiences in their own words, enabling researchers to explore the complexity and depth of their experiences.

The choice of interviews as the data collection method was carefully considered for its suitability in capturing the essence of the participants' experiences. Interviews were selected due to their ability to provide a platform for participants to describe their lived experiences, ethical dimensions of advocacy, and perceptions of their roles in supporting marginalized students. Additionally, interpretive phenomenology, the chosen philosophical framework, emphasizes the importance of understanding participants' interpretations and subjective experiences, making interviews a well-aligned data collection method.

The procedures involved in data collection began with participant recruitment, which utilized a combination of searching public directory information available on the Internet and snowball sampling. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, interviews were conducted over a two-month period. Each interview session consisted of 13 open-ended questions, designed to elicit participants' narratives and insights related to their work for social justice in educational contexts (e.g., How do you define JEDI in the context of the work you do? How do you and your colleagues effectively navigate JEDI tensions?). Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and later transcribed for analysis. During the transcription process, researchers engaged in active listening by repeatedly reviewing recordings to capture nuances and non-verbal cues in participants' responses.

Ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout the data collection process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Also, measures were put in place to safeguard the data's confidentiality, including secure storage of audio recordings and transcripts with restricted access only to the research team. These ethical safeguards aimed to respect participants' autonomy, protect their identities, and maintain the confidentiality of their responses, ensuring the ethical integrity of the study.

Participants included one self-identifying male and six self-identifying females. Three participants identified as Black, and four identified as Latina. The criteria for inclusion as a participant was an individual who is 18 or older who engages in social justice work in a U.S. educational context. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' characteristics.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education Sector
Alejandra	Female	Latina	PK-12
Isabella	Female	Latina	PK-12
Janis	Female	Black	Higher education
Maria	Female	Latina	Higher education
Shawna	Female	Latina	PK-12
Victoria	Female	Black	PK-12
William	Male	Black	Higher education

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis, which is a well-suited approach for uncovering patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data. We then engaged in an iterative and inductive analysis process. This involved multiple stages. We began by thoroughly reading and rereading the transcripts to become familiar with the content. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of the text that related to the research questions. These codes were often short descriptive labels for segments of data, using ATLAS.ti coding and analysis software. Like Varga and Paulus's (2014) description:

After several cycles of analysis, we formed tentative interpretations of what the various

discursive features were doing, moving back to the data to ground our claims. Finally, we selected representative excerpts from the data to demonstrate our findings through reworking of the analysis (p. 445).

ATLAS.ti allowed us to organize, code, and retrieve data efficiently, enhancing the rigor and efficiency of the analysis process. Codes were then grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meanings and patterns. We continually reviewed and refined these themes. Themes were reviewed, defined, and named to capture the essence of the data. This involved a collaborative process among researchers to ensure clarity and relevance. Utilizing multiple coders, researchers compared codes to ensure inter-coder reliability and consistent codes reflecting emergent themes across transcripts (MacPhail et al., 2016). This inductive and iterative process produced the following emergent theme: social justice leaders' development of frameworks for ethics and advocacy.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research conducted in this study, we employed several strategies. These strategies are commonly used in qualitative research to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' experiences and perspectives (Nassaji, 2020). To establish credibility, we employed member checking, a technique where participants were given the opportunity to review and validate the transcripts and findings. This allowed participants to ensure that their viewpoints were accurately captured and interpreted. Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the findings over time and across researchers (Nassaji, 2020). We used an iterative process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Multiple researchers were involved in coding and analyzing the data, and regular meetings were held to discuss emerging themes and resolve any discrepancies. This process helped ensure consistency and reduce the potential for bias in the interpretation of the data. Confirmability refers to the objectivity and neutrality of the findings (Nassaji, 2020). To enhance confirmability, the researchers maintained an audit trail documenting the research process, including decisions made during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This documentation allowed for transparency and helped establish the researchers' accountability. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applicable or transferable to other contexts or settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). To enhance transferability, we provided rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and the data collection process. We also included direct quotes from participants to support the interpretation of the findings. These details allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own contexts.

Critical Reflection and Reflexivity

We actively engaged in critical reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process. Critical reflection involves examining one's assumptions, biases, and preconceptions that may influence the research process and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Reflexivity, on the other hand, involves acknowledging the researcher's positionality and how their identities, experiences, and social locations may shape their perspectives and interactions with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Given the diverse backgrounds of the researchers, including our ethnicities and genders, critical reflection and reflexivity were particularly important in this study. We continuously reflected on our own perspectives, assumptions, and potential biases related to equity and inclusion issues in educational contexts. We acknowledged the influence of our identities on the research process and made efforts to minimize any potential biases. However, we recognize our identities and experiences inevitably influence our interpretations and research processes. Therefore, we recognize the need to identify our own diverse identities, including Black, Latino, and White ethnicities, and multiple gender identities. Also, as educators and leaders, we consider ourselves part of the population that we are studying, giving us "insider" status. However, we acknowledge that we have blind spots; therefore, we engage in reflective

practices to gain insights, develop new knowledge, and reflect on processes and our own thoughts.

We maintained reflexive journals, where we recorded their thoughts, reflections, and emotions related to the research process. These journals served as a means for self-reflection and allowed us to be aware of our positionality and its potential impact on data collection, analysis, and interpretation. By engaging in critical reflection and reflexivity, we aimed to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the study. We were able to critically examine our own perspectives, challenge assumptions, and acknowledge the potential limitations and implications of their identities in the research process. This approach helped ensure a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Results

This qualitative research study explored leaders' and educators' advocacy and ethics in promoting equity and inclusion initiatives in educational contexts. The study revealed that the participants recognized the moral and ethical obligations that they have as leaders to speak up and advocate for marginalized students, even when doing so may have personal and professional consequences. The participants emphasized the importance of having an ethical framework for advocacy and creating collaborative environments that support faculty, staff, and students' psychological well-being. The participants engaged in participatory and transformational leadership and building relationships and trust to facilitate difficult conversations and to promote equity, equality, and fairness. This research study's findings highlight the vital role that leaders play in creating positive and empowering learning environments that support all students' success, especially those who have been historically marginalized and underrepresented.

Leaders' Frameworks for Advocacy and Ethics

Participants described the development of ethical frameworks for advocacy based on communication and critical reflection, although not all participants identified with the activist role or label.

Advocating and Communicating

Victoria mentioned, "We have a moral obligation as an individual to do what's right, and there's a quote, 'to speak your truth, even if your voice trembles.'" She saw moral and ethical imperatives in her role as a leader to speak up even when it was challenging or when speaking up may have personal and professional consequences. Victoria described her role as "an advocate for our students, our most marginalized students, students who are often overlooked." She identified examples where she advocated for students such as discriminatory dress code and hair policies. She said that when barriers are put in place or marginalized students are placed at a disadvantage, "then we must speak up and say, 'it's not okay.'"

Janis also saw the need “bold leadership.” She discussed advice that she had heard from a DEI expert who stated:

I didn't know how I felt about his statement when he made this comment, he says, ‘Do the work. Call it something else. So, if ‘equity’ is a word that's distracting you from doing the work, do the work and call it something else.

Due to the political environment where she works, Janis focuses on doing equity work, rather than contesting discourses, and disarming others through diplomatic and caring communication.

William did not see himself as an activist but made connections between his work and an ethical framework focused on the advancement of equity and inclusion in his context. “The way that I've viewed the work, I feel like it has to be done with open hands and not a closed fist. And sometimes it's hard to not have a closed fist. But I don't.” He used his communication style to disarm people “to have the hard conversations and to really get at gender equity or gender equity issues or racial equity issues across the campus because people have got to be able to receive what you are saying.” William's approach involves using open communication about gender and racial equity issues. By avoiding an aggressive or confrontational approach, William believes that he can create a more receptive environment to tackle complex social issues.

William also discussed when a more direct and passionate approach is necessary. He narrated his story of the summer of 2020, the impact of George Floyd's murder, and the subsequent social and political unrest.

The statements that I made in the summer of 2020 ... were eye-opening for the [President's] Cabinet. I think some of that ... is also about being bold enough to make statements. ... Nobody was thoughtful enough to reach out from the Cabinet. That's the president and provost. ‘None of you said anything to me; you didn't ask anything.’ So, I think, from time to time, it's important to be very direct and poignant. But also understand that can't happen often because if it happens too often, the invisible barriers come up, and people don't listen and close off. But that ‘feeling statement’ sometimes is important.

William's colleagues, serving on the President's Cabinet, did not reach out or provide support to him or other people of color on campus during the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. He discussed the importance of sharing the impact these murders had on him specifically as a black man. These “feeling statements,” which he said should be rare to be impactful, are important because they underscore the need for both understanding and action on the parts of those in positions of power and privilege.

William organized a listening session among Black male students and the university's president. As a male of African descent, William understood the importance of being heard and seen. He

recognized that many Black students, particularly male students, often face systemic barriers that make it difficult for them to succeed in higher education.

So, I think that was one of the biggest efforts that was made was that we were able to coordinate with the group of students, many of them were student leaders of color, a listening session with the president. And for many of them have never had a

conversation with the president before, so that was very important thing. Being a male of African descent and listening to colleagues and listening to the banter around the country, many of us just wanted to be heard and we wanted to be seen.

By organizing this listening session, William helped create a space where these students could express their concerns and share their experiences with the university's leadership. William emphasized the need for recognizing of injustices and their effects on Black men in the United States.

Student Success, Institutional Culture, and Faculty Impact

Maria discussed her role in academia as a professor and her ethical obligation to teach educational leadership students to create equitable and supportive learning environments at the schools where they work.

I ended up ... in an ed leadership department and then facing a bunch of students, mostly white male students, where I'm like, oh my gosh, I better do a good job because I don't want you to go out there and mess with these children. Right? Like, I don't trust you. ... I'll be like, 'Listen, cuz I'm thinking about the people, like my people [participant emphasized], and thinking about the families I work with, the communities I come from. And so that, that pushed me to then really think about how do I use my influence, my leadership to, as an educator in those classes so that my students do not go and perpetuate these forms of oppression?

Maria is motivated by her personal background and experiences working with families and communities that she wants to help support and protect from harmful practices. Maria expressed a commitment to using her influence and leadership to make a positive impact on her students' future work with diverse students and communities.

Janis discussed her efforts and the relationship between student outcomes and equity work. She highlighted the importance of students succeeding in classes taught by culturally competent and equity-minded professors and instructors. According to Janis, supporting faculty and staff is crucial, emphasizing the need for them to feel valued and equipped in their roles. She stressed that equity work involves engaging “the campus community” and ensuring that “faculty and staff [feel] like they have what they need [and feel] valued in their roles and positions to come to work, being engaged in that psychological connection.” Janis directly

linked the creation of an inclusive environment for all campus constituencies to the promotion of a space where marginalized and underrepresented students can thrive.

Alejandra's leadership approach centered on addressing inequities and leveraging students' strengths, rather than fixating on their shortcomings. In her words, "Really making it about the impact that we're having on students, not about personal philosophical differences, but what impact are we having on kids? What impact do we want to have on kids?" Alejandra highlighted the importance of confronting uncomfortable conversations, particularly around the use of deficit language when discussing students. By doing so, she aims to bring awareness to how language and beliefs can contribute to educational inequities. She explained, "I've been able to address some of the inequalities, but also engaging in sometimes those uncomfortable conversations about how we're using deficit language when addressing kids, when we're discussing about how kids can or cannot do things."

Furthermore, Alejandra critiqued the prevailing testing culture, emphasizing that it tends to assess narrow skills like memorization and basic academic tasks. She stated, "What we're testing right now is their ability to memorize content or to be able to write, or to be able to read, which is very important. But if we're only focusing on that, we're not really looking at the bigger picture. We're not really giving the student an opportunity to show their true potential."

Alejandra's leadership aligns with current research advocating for a strengths-based approach in education. This approach, as supported by Adiredja (2019) and Pulcini (2022), emphasizes building on students' strengths rather than dwelling on their weaknesses. By adopting this perspective, educators can cultivate a positive and empowering learning environment that supports all students, regardless of their backgrounds or experiences.

The Ethics of Critical Reflection

It was also a clear imperative that the participants understood that they were a part of the work to be done as well, and reflection was a critical part of their ethical frameworks. They consistently referred to understanding their own biases and in the case of higher education faculty, helping their students and future leaders to engage in reflective work as well. For example, Maria shared:

There are times I am going to create intentional spaces for me to reflect on work we've done in areas that I want to improve on. ... And we need that pause and a reflective moment, which I teach my students to do as administrators.

Maria acknowledged that reflection and intentional spaces were necessary for personal growth and development. As an educator, she teaches her students to do the same and recognizes the value of creating intentional spaces to reflect on their work and take action to effect positive and just changes in educational systems.

Similarly, Isabella reported that critical reflection and mentoring have taught her about discerning when it is appropriate and worthwhile to engage in action to effect change.

Those are things that ... I've done and continue doing, addressing this mountain, systems of oppression. And sometimes I think ... you have to know when to engage and when not to engage. You have to understand the community itself, the school you're working with, and the district you're working with, children too, to ensure that you're moving the right way.

Through her process of critical reflection, Isabella was able to thoughtfully consider her unique context and the needs of the students, community, and individuals with whom she collaborates, and she uses this information to discern when to take action to address oppressive forces.

Shawna underscored the significance of incorporating critical reflection as an ethical and pedagogical tool within social justice leadership.

I'm going to go back to reflection we do we do a reflective practice, not just with staff, but we also do it with students, where students are having to forecast or what would you do different or how would you if you could do it all over, what would you do? So, I incorporate a lot of those kinds of practices so that students... own their accomplishments and to really reflect on the change [that] you can make.

Shawna advocated for a robust culture of critical reflection in social justice leadership that goes beyond a mere routine. It is positioned as an ethical practice, a teaching tool, and a means for individuals, both staff and students, to take ownership of their accomplishments and contribute to positive change.

Trust and Relationships

Trust is a fundamental component for school effectiveness and an integral element of positive school leadership and advocacy (Seashore et al., 2010). Participants spoke of the value of establishing trust as a district leader in Latinx and Black communities. Alejandra pointed out: "Collaboration is important. But before you are able to collaborate, you have to be able to build rapport. And in order to build rapport, people have to trust you. People have to trust each other." Likewise, when describing her strategies for effecting change and collaborating with others, Maria reported:

I've built that relationship with them to create a space where I can support them. ... So, I feel like a lot of that really intentional setting of space, and trust is super important to then engage in the work together.

Maria emphasized the intentional efforts she made to build trust with others to create a conducive space for support and engagement in their work. This aligns with the understanding that trust is not automatically granted but is nurtured through consistent actions and behaviors. By intentionally setting a space that promotes trust, leaders can create an atmosphere where individuals feel respected, valued, and supported.

Trust forms the foundation for building relationships, fostering collaboration, and creating a supportive environment for achieving educational goals. The statements from the participants in the study highlight the crucial role of trust in their leadership practices within Latinx and Black communities. Establishing trust is seen as a prerequisite for collaboration and rapport-building, as Alejandra noted. Before individuals can effectively work together towards common goals, they must feel comfortable and have confidence in one another. Trust acts as a facilitator, enabling open communication, shared decision-making, and a sense of psychological safety within the school community. Communities that have historically been marginalized or oppressed may have experienced mistrust due to systemic inequities. Building trust requires acknowledging and addressing these historical and structural factors, as well as demonstrating authenticity, empathy, and cultural responsiveness.

Discussion

This study reveals the ways equity and inclusion leaders used communication strategies to engage in social justice leadership and navigate “culture wars” and politics. Our findings highlight the importance of community- and relationship-building, effective communication, and personal examination in social justice leadership. Like the leaders in Niesche and Keddie (2016)’s study, our participants emphasized the need for advocacy that centers on student success, particularly for marginalized and underrepresented student populations. Their communication strategies focus on building relationships and community to create collaborative environments that are more conducive to all students’ learning and all employees’ productivity and engagement. Participants used communication strategies to advocate for marginalized and minoritized groups, viewing this as an ethical imperative for them as leaders even when this may come at personal costs for them. This study addresses a gap in the literature about the enacting of social justice leadership in educational contexts. Specifically, participants recognized and identified challenges that they faced but saw ways to address these through understanding and communicating well within their contexts, speaking up when policies are harmful to marginalized students, and developing and enacting ethical and moral frameworks for working with campus communities based on social justice principles.

Another unique finding is the emphasis on building an ethical framework for advocacy and the importance of personal examination to ensure that leaders are engaging in their work responsibly and with community in mind. Niesche and Keddie (2016) found that the educational leaders in their study “constitute themselves as ethical subjects and how they are also constituted by certain discourses as ethical subjects as they work towards goals of social justice in their schools” (p. 6). Likewise, our participants linked their identities as people of color with their ethical frameworks for student success, as they worked for all students to have opportunities and excellent educational experiences. This “moral frame of reference” drove the trajectory of these participants’ work (Normore & Brooks, 2014, p. 29). Their ethical discourses related to advocacy and responsibility for communities and children of color and their success and progress. When enacting their ethical frameworks for advocacy, they used reflection and communication strategies as tools. Participants frequently discussed reflecting on their practices and adjusting as their contexts required, engaging in what Freire (2018) described as

praxis, reflecting on the realities of their environment, and then taking action to change and improve conditions for underserved and minoritized populations, as critical reflection is necessary but not sufficient.

Scholars such as Darling-Hammond (2017) and Ladson-Billings (2014; 1995) have argued that effective social justice leaders promote equitable practices, challenge systemic inequalities, and cultivate a sense of agency and critical consciousness among students. This aligns with the participants' ideas that focus on critical reflection aims to empower students to recognize their capacity to effect change. However, centering the work on themselves and not solely on others meant that personal examination helped them to ensure the work is being done ethically, responsibly, and with the community and students in mind.

The field of ethnic studies might be helpful to social justice leadership in education, as these participants specifically discussed the ways that their identities as people of color intersected with their social justice in education work. Specifically, leaders' understanding of both "ethnic identity" and "ethnic consciousness" intersected with their leadership and ethical frameworks for advocacy. The Latinx leaders interviewed for this study, for example, understood both their Latinx identity as well as consciousness in their responses. They spoke of their responsibility to advocate for the Latino students in their schools. Likewise, the Black leaders interviewed recognized the ways their identities intersected with their work and the ethical imperative to serve underrepresented and minoritized populations.

Current literature on social justice in education supports our participants' goals and strategies. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) contended that "authentic participation" and community engagement are essential to social justice leadership (p. 167), and Hafner (2010) contended that leadership preparation programs should teach students to collect diverse forms of data and to conduct audits to ensure "equitable access and outcomes" and to develop strategic plans for change (p. 211). Further, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) argued that leadership preparation programs "should promote opportunities for critical reflection, leadership praxis, critical discourse, and develop critical pedagogy related to issues of ethics, inclusion, democratic schooling, and social justice" (p. 20). Scholars such as Gay (2018) and Grant and Sleeter (2012) have emphasized the importance of creating culturally responsive classrooms that validate students' identities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. By doing so, educators can foster a sense of belonging and agency, which are essential components of social justice leadership. Additionally, the concept of agency aligns with the work of scholars like Darling-Hammond (2017), Ladson-Billings (2014; 1995), and Nieto (2017), who argue for empowering students to recognize their own potential and the impact of their decisions. By instilling a sense of agency in students and the belief that their choices have significance, educators can motivate them to become active agents of change and to become successful learners.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study's participants all worked and resided in the United States. Their contexts are diverse. However, their experiences may not be generalizable to populations everywhere. We have provided rich descriptions and detailed quotations to ensure that readers can determine

applicable insights for their own contexts. All participants were people of color, and there was only one male-identifying participant. Further qualitative studies may seek more diverse samples to learn more about the ways identities intersect with justice work in educational contexts.

Conclusions and Implications

The study aimed to explore the experiences of education leaders and educators engaged in equity and inclusion work, specifically how they engage in social justice leadership. The conceptual framework was based on social justice leadership principles and Critical Race Theory, as defined in the previous literature and which are focused on creating policies that advance human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, legal, and personal dimensions. The study utilized a qualitative methodology, where seven participants were interviewed, and a central theme was derived from the transcripts. The emergent theme was educational leaders' development of frameworks for social justice advocacy and ethics. The findings highlighted the importance of developing ethical frameworks for advocacy, community- and relationship-building, and a culture of belongingness for marginalized populations. It was also important for the leaders to understand their own biases and engage in reflective work. Participants' work focused on helping campuses and students be more successful, with the goal of reducing the achievement gap between marginalized and white students.

While there is a growing body of work on social justice leadership in education, there is a need for more qualitative research on the experiences of leaders, teachers, and students engaged in equity and inclusion work. There is also a need to explore quantitatively the impact of social justice leadership on student outcomes and the achievement gap. Additionally, there is a need to include the perspectives of leaders of color (LOC). A recent Wallace Foundation report concluded that LOC are particularly important in schools with marginalized students (Grissom et al., 2021).

The study has several implications for policy and practice. Specifically, educators' and leaders' work entails consistent reflection and mindful actions to ensure that equity and inclusion work is done ethically, responsibly, and with the community in mind. Leaders can integrate social justice principles into policy and practice at the institutional level by ensuring that students are treated fairly in discipline and academic policies and that educators are equipped with the appropriate resources and professional development to support all students' successful learning. The emphasis on ethical advocacy for marginalized student populations can inform leadership development programs and guide leaders in their daily work. For example, educational leadership educators can focus on communication, reflection, and community- and trust-building skills in training future educational leaders. Leaders and educators also must work to understand their own biases and engage in reflective work. These understandings support the development of advocacy-focused leadership, which means doing social justice work with a critical lens and not perpetuating biases.

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