



Review on *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality: Possibilities for Democratic Schooling*—A Journey through Educational Leadership, Equity, and Practice

Prince Oduro

Department of Educational Leadership, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

Email: odurop@miamioh.edu

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical review of the book, *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality: Possibilities for Democratic Schooling* authored by [1]. It explores the major themes and implications for educational leadership, policy, and global equity. Using Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) as guiding frameworks, the review analyzes how the authors exposed the political nature of education policy and proposed democratic, justice-oriented approaches to reform. This review highlights the book's contributions to leadership practice, policy development, and decolonial perspectives in education. Interwoven with personal reflections, the review connects these ideas to a broader understanding of leadership as moral, relational, and transformative work. It further emphasizes that education policy and leadership must center on equity, collaboration, and human dignity to advance inclusive and democratic schooling worldwide.

Subject Areas

Pedagogy, Philosophy

Keywords

Educational Leadership, Critical Policy Analysis, Democratic Schooling, Culturally Responsive Leadership

1. Introduction

Educational leadership today is confronted with mounting tensions between the

democratic promise of schooling and the persistent inequalities that characterize educational systems. In the context of the book, the authors [1] provide a timely and provocative contribution. They situated educational leadership as a deeply political and ethical endeavor and urged school leaders to interrogate the structures, policies, and discourses that perpetuate inequality. This review engages the book on two levels. First, as a critical review of its central arguments and also as a reflection on their implications for educational leadership scholarship and practice. This review employs CPA, CRT, and CCW as the analytical lenses guiding the evaluation. These frameworks make it possible to assess how the authors [1] expose policy as a political project, center racial equity in leadership, and reimagine educational practice through community knowledge and agency. Rather than simply summarizing the book, the discussion extends the authors' [1] insights by linking them to lived experiences, critical theories, and ongoing debates in leadership and policy. In doing so, the review highlights how *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality* [1] advances both theoretical conversations and the practical work of reimagining schools as sites of democracy, equity, and justice. The purpose of this review and reflection is to critically examine the key contributions of [1] work and consider its implications for contemporary educational leadership. This review is further organized into thematic sections. First, it engages with the book's analysis of education policy and inequality, and reveals how structural reforms often reproduce rather than reduce disparities. Next, it considers the critical theories and frameworks the authors [1] mobilize to reframe leadership as a social justice practice. The review then turns to lived my experiences of inequity in schools and the possibilities for reimagining leadership beyond traditional authority models. Additional sections focus on culturally responsive leadership, democracy and schooling, and the broader implications for leaders in practice. Finally, this review offers reflective insights on the enduring relevance of democratic, equity-driven leadership for both scholarship and personal practice.

2. Book Overview

The authors [1] drew on CPA, and revealed how neoliberal reforms such as *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* privilege efficiency, accountability, and market logic while masking deeper inequities tied to race, class, and power. Through this lens, policy is viewed as a reflection of dominant interests rather than a tool for justice. Equally important, the book exposes how contemporary reforms reproduce inequality rather than eliminate it. Using insights from CRT and social reproduction theory, [1] show how policies often intensify segregation, narrow educational opportunities, and erode public confidence, particularly in low-income and racially marginalized schools. These inequities, the authors argue, persist because education remains entangled with broader systems of privilege and exclusion. The discussion then shifts to the role of democracy in schooling, where [1] reclaim Dewey's vision of education as a lived democratic practice.

They critique the erosion of participatory governance under managerial and privatized reforms and call for inclusive, community-driven decision-making that values diverse voices and experiences. Another key theme concerns leadership and power. The authors redefine leadership as a moral and political act, one that must challenge inequity rather than manage it. The authors argued that leaders must interrogate their positionality, disrupt deficit narratives, and redistribute power to create conditions for collective agency and transformation. Central to their argument is CPA, which the authors present as both a framework and a method. CPA compels educators to question who benefits, who is marginalized, and how power circulates through policy processes. When combined with CRT and CPA, it becomes a tool for equity-driven reform. Finally, the book offers possibilities for democratic and just schooling. The authors urged educators to cultivate schools as spaces of care, dialogue, and inclusion. In doing so, [1] blend theory with practice, and position educational leaders as moral actors capable of reshaping schools into democratic communities grounded in equity and hope.

3. Thematic Analysis of Key Ideas in the Book

3.1. Policy as a Political Project and the Reproduction of Inequality

Education policy is not neutral; it is a political project that reflects who has power and whose interests are protected [1]. From the starting point, the book shows how neoliberal reforms, high-stakes testing, strict accountability systems, school choice, and privatization, promise improvement but often deepen inequality. First, test-driven accountability narrows the curriculum and labels schools serving low-income communities and students of color as “failing,” even when test scores largely track poverty and segregation rather than teaching quality [2] [3]. Second, market logics reward competition and individual choice, which in practice sort students by race and class and drain resources from neighborhood public schools [4]. Third, policy language often hides its values behind “neutral” terms, masking how rules and funding formulas advantage some groups while disadvantaging others. Moreover, the authors connect these policy patterns to structural inequality. Research shows that segregation by race and class has persisted, or grown, in many places, with serious consequences for access to experienced teachers, advanced coursework, and stable school climates [5] [6]. Because policy is embedded in wider systems of power, school reforms that ignore housing, health, and labor realities will predictably reproduce the status quo [7]. Policy is a mirror of society’s power relations. When it centers competition over care, efficiency over equity, and private advantage over the common good, it widens gaps instead of closing them [3] [8]. The authors urged leaders and scholars to name policy as political, surface its assumptions, and design remedies that redistribute opportunity rather than blaming students and teachers. This requires reading policies critically, asking who benefits and who is marginalized, and placing data in historical context as opposed to treating numbers as neutral [1] [9].

3.2. Democracy in Schooling and Possibilities for Democratic Renewal

The book then turns to a central question; what is school for in a democracy? Following Dewey, the authors argue that democracy is not only voting or governance; it is a lived practice of shared inquiry, dialogue, and responsibility inside classrooms and schools [10]. However, managerial and market reforms have reduced participation by concentrating decisions in distant agencies or private boards. As a result, families, students, and communities, especially those historically marginalized, often have little say in matters that shape their children's learning [1]. Consequently, the book calls for democratic renewal. At the school level, this means building structures that invite real voice and power-sharing, school-community councils, participatory budgeting, transparent equity audits with public discussion, and inclusive IEP processes where parents and students are co-decision-makers [11] [12]. In the classroom, it means treating students as thinkers and citizens, making space for deliberation on public issues, reasoned disagreement, and collaborative problem-solving [13]. International comparisons further suggest that systems with stronger local trust, professional respect, and public participation tend to be more equitable and more resilient [14]. Importantly, democratic schooling is not an add-on. It is a different way of organizing power, from "doing policy to communities" toward doing policy with communities. When schools share information openly, welcome critique, and distribute authority, they build the social trust needed for difficult change. In short, the authors show that democracy is both the purpose of schooling and the method for making schools more just [1] [10] [15].

3.3. Leadership and Power with CPA as a Tool for Action

The book reframes leadership as a moral and political practice, not a technical job. Leaders make daily choices about whose knowledge counts, which histories are honored, and how resources are distributed. Therefore, the authors urged leaders to adopt CPA as a practical toolkit. They urged readers to ask who benefits, who is burdened, what narratives are normalized, and how decisions can be redesigned to advance equity [1] [9]. CPA turns analysis into action by pairing evidence with public learning, sharing findings with staff, families, and students and deciding next steps together. To move from principle to practice, the book aligns CPA with transformative, social justice, and culturally responsive leadership. First, leaders can conduct equity audits, disaggregating data on discipline, special education identification, access to advanced courses, extracurriculars, climate, and staffing, and then set measurable goals with timelines and community oversight [16] [17]. Second, they can invest in adult learning that surfaces bias and builds culturally responsive and culturally sustaining practice in every classroom [18]-[21]. Third, drawing on CCW, leaders can recognize the assets families and students already bring, aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital, and design programs that leverage rather than "fix" those strengths [22]. Moreover,

leadership that centers marginalized voices requires new power arrangements. Transformative leadership shares authority, invites critique, and protects the conditions for honest dialogue, even when it is uncomfortable [23] [24] [25]. Distributed leadership builds collective agency across roles, reducing burnout and strengthening improvement [26]. Ethical leadership keeps care and justice in view, ensuring that rules serve people rather than the other way around [27]. Finally, leaders act beyond the schoolhouse, on funding formulas, accountability rules, and enrollment policies, because without policy change, school-level gains are fragile [1] [9]. In brief, leadership + CPA offers a roadmap. They analyze power, center community knowledge, act on inequities with transparent goals, and advocate across systems [28]. This is how leadership becomes a lever for democratic, culturally sustaining, and just schooling.

4. The Book's Contributions to Policy, Practice and Global Scholarship

4.1. Contributions to Education Policy

Beyond leadership, the book makes a strong theoretical and practical contribution to the field of education policy. The authors [1] emphasize that policy is deeply embedded in power relations, reflecting the ideological struggles of society rather than objective reform. Using CPA, the authors make visible how neoliberal logics, efficiency, accountability, and competition, shape policy discourse in ways that sustain inequality [3] [8]. Their work challenges policymakers to move beyond surface-level “achievement gaps” and instead address opportunity gaps rooted in history, racism, and social stratification. A key contribution of the book lies in demonstrating that policy can be both the problem and the solution. Policy becomes a problem when it is framed by neoliberal logics, standardization, competition, and high-stakes accountability, that centralize authority, narrow learning, and reproduce inequities [3] [4] [8]. When designed through participatory and democratic processes, policy becomes a tool for social transformation. The authors advocate for inclusive policy design, where educators, parents, students, and communities share decision-making authority. This approach mirrors democratic theories of schooling grounded in Dewey’s belief that education and democracy are mutually reinforcing [10]. The book therefore encourages a reimagining of policy work as dialogic, relational, and human-centered rather than technocratic. In practice, this means crafting policies that expand participation, redistribute resources, and protect the voices of those most affected by educational injustice. Finally, the authors contribute to policy scholarship by connecting critical analysis with leadership praxis. They argue that equity-oriented leaders must interpret policies and also advocate for policy change, from local school rules to state and federal mandates. Their integration of CPA, CRT, and Transformative Leadership provides a multidimensional framework for educators who wish to bridge the divide between critical scholarship and actionable reform.

4.2. Contributions to Educational Leadership Practice

The authors [1] make a significant contribution to educational leadership theory and practice by reimagining leadership as a political, ethical, and justice-oriented enterprise. They challenge the traditional view of leadership as technical management and instead define it as moral action, one that must interrogate how power, privilege, and policy intersect in schools [1]. This reconceptualization aligns with Shields's notion of transformative leadership, which emphasizes moral courage, relational trust, and the ethical responsibility to confront inequity [23] [24]. Similarly, [25] describes social justice leadership as a commitment to dismantling barriers that marginalize students, especially those tied to race, class, and disability [25]. The book extends these frameworks by situating leadership within broader structures of policy and governance. It urges practitioners to lead with political consciousness and ethical clarity. Furthermore, the authors bridge the gap between policy critique and practical leadership action. When CPA is integrated with leadership discourse, they equip leaders with tools to diagnose inequity and identify hidden power relations in everyday policy decisions [9]. This connection between macro-level policy analysis and micro-level leadership practice marks an important theoretical advancement. Leadership, therefore, must value the voices, histories, and resources of families and communities that have long been excluded from educational decision-making. [1] present leadership not as a static position but as an evolving process of reflection, collaboration, and advocacy grounded in care, democracy, and equity.

4.3. Contributions to Global and Decolonial Perspectives on Leadership

The arguments advanced by the authors [1] extend well beyond the United States. The authors offer insights that resonate within global debates about power, democracy, and decolonization in education [1]. Their critique of neoliberal governance speaks to how education systems worldwide have adopted policies that privilege efficiency, standardization, and competition at the expense of equity and care [8] [14]. Across many parts of Africa, Europe, and Latin America, similar reforms have emphasized testing and market-driven accountability, often marginalizing local knowledge and community voices in decision-making. The authors challenge global leaders to rethink whose interests are served when policy agendas are imported or imposed across different national contexts. Furthermore, the book contributes to decolonial leadership thought by calling attention to how dominant policy discourses reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and authority. Drawing on critical traditions aligned with Freire and Giroux, the authors [1] invite leaders to recognize that the struggle for educational justice is also a struggle over epistemology, what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is seen as a knower [29] [30]. This perspective aligns with global efforts to decenter Eurocentric paradigms of leadership that valorize control, rationality, and hierarchy while silencing relational, communal, and culturally embedded forms of leadership

found in many non-Western traditions [31] [32]. In this way, their framework encourages educational leaders to integrate indigenous, local, and participatory knowledge systems into policy and practice. Finally, the authors provide a framework for comparative reflection across contexts. Their insistence that leadership and policy are moral and political practices invites a global dialogue about how schools can resist colonial logics and cultivate democratic participation. The authors call for relational ethics, cultural responsiveness, and shared governance resonates with reform efforts in Europe's multicultural systems, Africa's postcolonial education reforms, and Latin America's participatory pedagogies. The book therefore, contributes to an emerging vision of global educational leadership that is contextual, dialogic, and decolonial, one that honors diverse histories and reclaims education as a collective human endeavor.

5. Gaps, Limitations, and Areas for Further Reflection

While the book makes a compelling case for democratic schooling and critical policy engagement, it leaves some areas that invite deeper exploration. One limitation lies in its theoretical density. Readers new to critical policy or leadership studies may find the language challenging without clearer guidance on practical implementation. Although the authors provide strong conceptual grounding, fewer concrete examples are offered to show how educators at different levels, teachers, principals, district leaders, can operationalize these ideas in daily practice. A few brief case studies or vignettes could have made the concepts more accessible. Additionally, while the text powerfully critiques neoliberalism in the U.S. context, it pays less attention to global and comparative perspectives, especially how similar dynamics play out in the Global South. Including examples from African, Asian, or Latin American education systems, where colonial legacies and development agendas intersect with neoliberal reforms, would have strengthened its global relevance. This gap is particularly notable because the book's democratic vision could inspire broader conversations about educational justice across diverse political contexts. Finally, although the authors gesture toward culturally responsive and community-based leadership, the role of teacher agency and student activism receives limited attention. Future research could expand on how teachers and students themselves act as policy actors and co-creators of democratic schooling. Despite these gaps, the book remains a vital resource for scholars and practitioners seeking to align education policy and leadership with equity, democracy, and social justice.

6. Personal Reflections: A Journey through Educational Leadership

6.1. Democracy and Schooling Reconsidered

One central theme that stood out to me as I read the book was democratic education. This topic has also been a topical issue which has sparked lots of debates and discussions on my Ph.D. journey. While democracy in schools has its own

advantages [13] [15], studies show that undemocratic school systems, such as those found in charter schools, can offer a more streamlined and efficient approach to decision-making [33]-[38]. In these systems, centralized control allows for quicker implementation of policies and innovations without the prolonged debates that often accompany more democratic structures. However, my understanding of whether democracy in schools is always the best approach evolved when I had the opportunity to read *Jim Crow Schools: The Impact of Charters on Public Education* authored by [39], in the course Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Diversity [39]. The book sheds light on the significant collateral damage inflicted on public schools during the rise of charter schools, particularly in New Orleans. One striking example I observed was the governance of district funds by a state board composed of 11 members, only two of whom resided in New Orleans or its metro area. Despite managing a budget exceeding \$400 million, this board meets not in New Orleans but in Baton Rouge, more than 80 miles away. Notably, this was a clear example of a lack of local representation in decision-making and the erosion of democratic principles in education governance. As a result, the absence of local voices in these decisions suggests a profound disconnect between the policymakers and the communities they are supposed to serve. Without representation from the local community, those most directly affected by these policies, there is a risk that decisions about the allocation of resources and the direction of public education will fail to reflect the needs and aspirations of the students and families they are intended to benefit. The shift towards charter schools and other forms of privatization has led to a loss of public accountability and diminished democratic control over educational institutions. In many cases, charter schools operate independently with minimal input from local communities and limited oversight from elected officials, thereby undermining the principles of democratic governance in education [33]. One of the most striking aspects of this loss of democratic control is the erosion of community involvement and engagement in the decision-making processes related to education. Traditional public schools often have elected school boards accountable to the local community [40]. They provide avenues for parents, educators, and community members to participate in shaping educational policies and priorities. Undoubtedly, the rise of charter schools, which are frequently run by private entities or nonprofit organizations [41], can circumvent these democratic structures. Instead of being accountable to local stakeholders, charter schools may answer primarily to corporate boards or external funders, diminishing the influence of community voices in shaping educational practices [35].

Democracy has to be lived in the classroom, in the school, and in everyday life [10]. The authors [1] followed these principles to explore ways in which democracy is viewed in current policy debates with these critical questions. How do we model democracy in schools and district governance? Who should be included in school decision-making and in which areas? How do we build spaces for open deliberation? And how broad should school inclusion be? However, these questions

remain largely unanswered in many educational contexts. Schools today often fail to embody democratic ideals and operate instead as hierarchical institutions where decision-making is concentrated among a select few, and the voices of marginalized groups, including students, parents, and certain communities, are often excluded [40]. This disconnect emphasizes the urgent need to revisit the origins of democracy as envisioned in classical traditions. In those traditions, democracy was more than a political system; it was a way of life rooted in active participation, collective responsibility, and equal representation [41]. It required open deliberation and the involvement of all citizens in shaping decisions that affected their lives [42]. It is my view that revisiting these principles can provide a framework for reimagining schools as genuinely democratic spaces. Schools should be environments where every stakeholder, students, teachers, parents, and the broader community, has a meaningful voice and role in shaping the educational experience. Discussing the article titled, *Schooling as a White Good*, in the course Education and Democratic Society. The author [43] revealed how schooling in the United States has historically functioned not as a public good but as a white good, designed to maintain white advantage and racial hierarchies. Meanwhile, it has also been asserted that a school is not public merely because it receives public funds but because it is transparent, accountable to the public, and committed to fostering a democratic public sphere and advancing the common good [44]. Subsequent analysis supports this position and posits that schools have been deliberately structured to reinforce systemic inequality through mechanisms such as curricula centered on white narratives, inequitable resource allocation, and the marginalization of Black and brown communities [43]. While the rhetoric of meritocracy suggests that schooling is a tool for upward mobility, the reality, as that analysis points out, is that it often perpetuates existing inequities, and makes it a site of exclusion rather than inclusion. With an interest in social justice and inclusion, I contend that the relevance of democracy in schools is especially critical when considering the inclusion and equitable treatment of children with disabilities, particularly in the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Imagine a child with autism enrolled in a public school, where decisions about their educational goals, accommodations, and support services are made without meaningful input from their parents or the child themselves. Undoubtedly, there will be a risk of overlooking the child's specific needs and preferences, potentially leading to a lack of appropriate support [44]. There could also be a higher likelihood of creating an educational environment that does not fully address the child's unique learning requirements. The result of this could leave the student in feelings of alienation and frustration, because there is a failure to meet the child's potential. This lack of inclusion will undermine the principles of democracy and deny the child and their family a voice in shaping an educational experience that directly affects their future. Meanwhile, studies have revealed that the IEP process, intended to be collaborative, often falls short when schools prioritize administrative convenience or adhere rigidly to standardized procedures and ignore the unique

needs and strengths of the child [11] [12]. This means that a democratic approach to IEP development would involve creating spaces for open deliberation and meaningful participation. This will mean that parents, educators, specialists, and, when appropriate, the child are actively engaged in decision-making. This will further suggest that the child's voice is heard, and their specific needs are addressed in ways that honor their dignity and potential. Such a practice also aligns with the broader democratic ideals of shared responsibility and collective action outlined elsewhere [33]. Thus, if we want to foster a sense of ownership and empowerment for all stakeholders involved. Dewey reminds us that:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity ([10]: p. 87).

Therefore, it is important to note that inclusion in decision-making processes will not only be beneficial to the individual child, but it will also enrich the school community, teaching students and staff the value of equity, empathy, and collaboration [45]. My experience over the years reveals that when schools model democratic principles in their interactions, they send a powerful message about the importance of valuing every individual's perspective and create an educational environment where all students can thrive. My experience over the years reveals that when schools model democratic principles in their interactions, they send a powerful message about the importance of valuing every individual's perspective and create an educational environment where all students can thrive. The erosion of democracy in education is one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century. Neoliberal reforms, such as test-based accountability and charter school expansion, prioritize efficiency and market logic at the expense of community voice and democratic participation [3] [4]. Such reforms centralize decision-making power, reducing opportunities for parents, teachers, and students to meaningfully shape school governance. True democratic schooling requires more than representative governance structures. It demands that classrooms themselves become sites of deliberation and critical inquiry [46]. [13] shows that schools that engage students in civic dialogue cultivate higher levels of democratic engagement later in life. Participatory governance enhances students' sense of agency and belonging [15]. Comparative international research confirms that systems with robust local governance and democratic traditions, such as Finland, achieve greater equity and public trust [14]. To reclaim democracy in schools, leaders must develop governance practices that genuinely include marginalized communities. Participatory budgeting, family-school partnerships, and inclusive IEP processes embody democratic ideals by recognizing the expertise of those historically excluded from decision-making [11] [12]. Democracy in schooling is not a static structure but an

ongoing practice that must be continually renewed through inclusive leadership.

6.2. Reimagining Leadership Beyond Authority

Before enrolling in the Ph.D. program, my understanding of leadership was largely framed by notions of control, power, command, influence, and authority. These ideas were deeply ingrained in me through my upbringing and early encounters with leaders in my home, school, and community, settings where authority was seldom questioned. At home, my late father embodied the ultimate authority figure; his opinions were final. It left no room for debate or dissent. Disobedience was swiftly punished under our family's moral code. The same pattern existed in school. The headmaster's word was law, and questioning it was viewed not as critical thinking but as disrespect. Teachers likewise used discipline as their main tool for enforcing compliance. In the community, elders and local leaders exercised similar authority. Decisions were made unilaterally, often without consulting youth or marginalized groups. I vividly remember a community leader organizing a road repair project through communal labor. Though his intentions were good, his authoritarian approach, dictating the date, tasks, and methods, left participants feeling coerced rather than empowered. Many completed the work resentfully, out of obligation rather than shared purpose. These experiences shaped my early conception of leadership as a top-down, command-driven practice, one that prioritized obedience over dialogue. Yet such narrow conceptualizations limit the transformative potential of leadership. As Foucault argues, when leadership is understood as *control*, it reduces followers to objects of regulation and compliance, suppressing creativity and initiative [47]. When defined as *power*, it often manifests as domination and coercion rather than empowerment. It reinforces inequities and silences dissent [48]. When framed as *influence*, it risks devolving into manipulation and persuasion that serve the leader's interests rather than the collective good [49]. And when equated with *authority*, leadership becomes bound to hierarchy and tradition. It discourages dialogue, innovation, and shared responsibility [50].

These four limiting conceptions, control, power, influence, and authority, and their consequences are illustrated in **Figure 1**, which visually summarizes how such views collectively stifle creativity, reinforce inequality, and inhibit collaboration. However, my doctoral studies fundamentally challenged and expanded this understanding. In my *Culture and Leadership in Education* course, an exercise required students to list words that defined leadership. Without hesitation, I wrote "control, power, command, and authority", reflecting the hierarchical ideas I had internalized. My colleagues, however, offered words such as *service, collaboration, inspiration, participation, love, and empathy*. Their responses disrupted my assumptions. It actually revealed leadership as a practice grounded not in dominance but in humility, shared responsibility, and the empowerment of others. This realization was transformative. I came to understand that authentic leadership is not about exerting dominance or enforcing obedience [51], but about fostering

trust [52], building genuine relationships [53], and cultivating environments where individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute [54]. This paradigm shift compelled me to rethink the rigid hierarchies I had grown up with and to embrace a more inclusive, relational, and transformative philosophy of leadership; a view further reinforced by [1] whose work on CPA challenges traditional notions of power, politics, and governance [1].

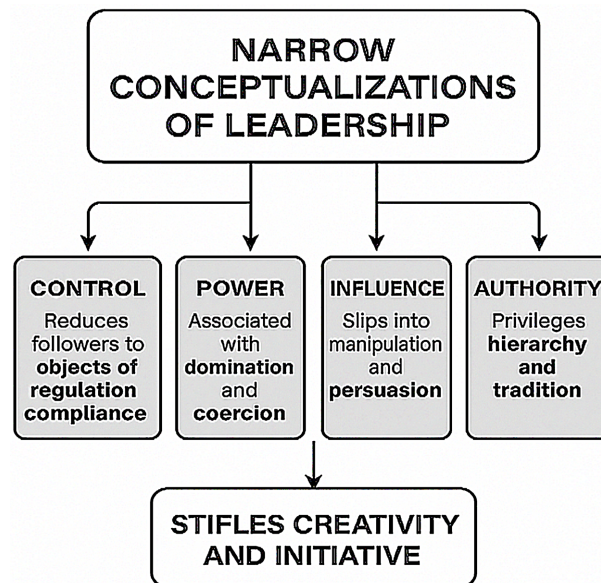


Figure 1. Narrow conceptualizations of leadership and their consequences.

CPA emphasizes the importance of interrogating the ways policy intersects with place and equity. It shows how hierarchical structures often marginalize already disenfranchised communities [55]. Scholarship has emphasized that leadership must be reimagined to center marginalized voices [18] [23], redistribute power [56], and prioritize equity and accountability [57]. In my view, these insights denote that leadership, whether in schools, policy contexts, or communities, cannot remain rooted in exclusionary practices. Instead, it must embrace inclusivity [58], mutual respect [59], and shared responsibility [60] to advance collective growth and social transformation. Reimagining leadership requires breaking with authoritarian legacies that equate leadership with power and control. Research shows that hierarchical, command-and-control styles correlate with teacher burnout, job dissatisfaction, and high turnover rates [61]. In contrast, collaborative models such as distributed leadership emphasize collective agency and the sharing of expertise across organizational levels, improving both teacher morale and student outcomes [26]. Ethical leadership frameworks add another dimension: leadership should be grounded in care, justice, and critique, and professional ethics should balance fairness with compassion [27] [62]. Leaders who cultivate dialogic practices create spaces for open dialogue and dissent and develop cultures of trust and shared responsibility [63]. By contrast, leaders who cling to authority risk replicating inequities and silencing the very voices most critical to institutional

transformation. Hierarchical leadership structures often reproduce systems of exclusion rather than challenge them [23], and authority-centered approaches sustain the very inequities leaders claim to resist [25]. Culturally responsive and critical leadership should decentralize power and co-construct knowledge with marginalized communities [18] [64]. Likewise, ethical and distributed models of leadership, grounded in dialogue and shared agency, are essential to prevent the moral and structural stagnation that emerges when authority goes unchallenged [27] [26]. The call to reimagine leadership beyond authority thus represents a fundamental shift: leadership must be less about control and more about fostering conditions in which justice, inclusion, and collaboration can flourish.

6.3. Critical Theories and Frameworks for Leadership

During my doctoral course *Culture and Leadership in Education*, I encountered the seminal article *Leadership for Social Justice and Equity: Weaving a Transformative Framework and Pedagogy* by [65]. It was my first real introduction to three powerful lenses, adult learning theory, transformative learning theory, and critical social theory. At the time, I had not fully considered how such frameworks could be applied to educational leadership, but the experience was both unsettling and inspiring. I found myself wrestling with my own assumptions about leadership while also envisioning new possibilities for practice. Brown's work was eye-opening in its insistence on critical reflection and rational discourse as tools for preparing leaders to confront inequities. The article invited me to think about leadership as a moral responsibility to challenge injustice. During class discussions, I came to appreciate how each framework contributes uniquely. Adult learning theory pushes educators to recognize biases and cultivate inclusive practices; transformative learning theory deepens this process by encouraging critical reflection and the reexamination of assumptions; and critical social theory equips leaders to expose and dismantle oppressive power structures embedded within schools. This learning experience became a turning point in my doctoral journey. What began as a theoretical introduction evolved into a personal call to action, an invitation to lead in ways that are critically conscious, equity-driven, and transformative. The foundational knowledge I gained from this course continues to shape how I frame leadership and strengthens my commitment to educational justice. Critical frameworks provide powerful tools for reconceptualizing leadership as more than administrative efficiency. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* argues that education is a political act requiring dialogue, reflection, and action to transform oppressive systems [66]. Leaders informed by critical pedagogy are therefore called to cultivate democratic spaces where marginalized voices are centered. Postcolonial theorists extend this critique by showing how Western policy frameworks often silence indigenous ways of knowing and perpetuate colonial hierarchies, even in contemporary education systems [67]. Leadership preparation must therefore interrogate whose knowledge counts and how dominant paradigms can be disrupted. Equity-focused leadership is also tied to the development

of critical consciousness. Leaders must recognize how privilege and oppression function simultaneously within schools [25]. [64] argue for “Applied Critical Leadership”, where reflection translates into concrete practices for social justice [64]. Culturally sustaining leadership pushes leaders to move beyond surface-level inclusion toward preserving and nurturing cultural practices that schools often attempt to erase [20]. Collectively, these frameworks situate leadership as a moral and political project, one that demands courage, humility, and a willingness to challenge institutional norms.

6.4. Experiences of Inequity in Schools

I have come to realize that injustices in schools are not abstract concepts but lived realities that shape the daily experiences of millions of students worldwide [68]. I have witnessed this in Ghana, as students with disabilities and those from rural areas often endure systemic neglect and limited access to quality education. Similar patterns are evident in various media sources. For instance, the BBC News documentary *Inside Ghana’s Hidden Classrooms: The Struggle for Inclusive Education* revealed how many children with disabilities remain excluded from mainstream schooling due to inadequate teacher training and infrastructure [69]. Likewise, the DW Africa feature *Ghana’s Rural Schools and the Education Divide* documented the persistent disparities between urban and rural schools [70]. I have also engaged with similar discussions in classroom dialogues where the struggles of marginalized communities continue to serve as a central theme in exploring equity and inclusion. On paper, policies like the 2004 *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and the 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) promise equity and access. In practice, however, schools often lack the resources to deliver on these commitments [71]. Too many students are denied accommodations [72], schools remain segregated by race and class [73], and students of color continue to face disproportionate discipline [74] and limited access to advanced programs [75]. This contradiction between policy intentions and real-world outcomes exposes systemic failures. It also reveals the urgent need for accountability and for leaders who can align policy with practice. For me, this realization emphasizes why culturally responsive leadership is essential. Schools must become spaces of empowerment and transformation, not institutions that reproduce inequities. Yet this requires courageous leaders who are willing to dismantle entrenched systems of exclusion. As I reflect on Brown’s call for social justice leadership, I keep asking: What would it take for educational leaders to truly confront inequality? Why do so many students still remain trapped within institutionalized oppression [32] [76]? And are we preparing leaders to take these risks, or simply to protect the status quo?

The challenge is undeniable. As Sapon-Shevin reminds us, the struggle for inclusion is not theoretical, it is as real as the classrooms we teach in and the students whose voices are too often silenced [77]. Leadership preparation programs must therefore move beyond technical training. They must cultivate self-awareness,

critical dialogue, and the capacity to take bold, equity-driven action. Brown's emphasis on experiential learning affirms my conviction that transformative leadership begins with personal growth, but it must extend into collective action. My own journey as a student from a disadvantaged background confirms how deeply inequities are embedded. Barriers such as lower test scores, reduced graduation rates, and decreased college access persist for students like me [68]-[79]. [1] show how segregation by race and class further intensifies these challenges [1]. This reality connects directly to the principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which insists on the centrality of race and racism in education. CRT exposes structural inequities and demands that leaders work toward systemic reform [80]. It's call to elevate experiential knowledge also reminds us of the need to center the lived experiences of students and families most affected by injustice.

Alongside CRT, Yosso's Cultural Wealth Capital Theory gave me a new lens [22]. It helped me see that communities of color hold powerful forms of knowledge, skills, and resilience that have long been ignored or undervalued. Cultural wealth goes beyond academic achievement or financial resources; it encompasses the social, familial, linguistic, and aspirational strengths that communities of color draw upon for resilience and success [22]. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT), Yosso challenges deficit perspectives that frame communities of color as lacking the cultural capital necessary for success [22]. Instead, she introduces the concept of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) to highlight the diverse and interrelated forms of capital that marginalized communities possess and use to navigate oppressive systems. These include aspirational capital (the ability to maintain hopes and dreams despite barriers), familial capital (cultural knowledge nurtured through kinship and community networks), social capital (resources gained through relationships and community support), navigational capital (skills to maneuver through institutions not built for marginalized people), resistant capital (knowledge and behaviors that challenge inequality), and linguistic capital (the value of multilingualism and diverse communication styles). Within the context of educational leadership, Yosso's framework provides a transformative lens for reimagining how leaders understand and engage with the communities they serve. Rather than approaching marginalized groups through a lens of remediation or deficiency, leaders informed by CCW theory recognize and leverage the existing assets of families and students. This perspective aligns closely with culturally responsive and transformative leadership models, which emphasize relational trust, shared authority, and inclusive decision-making [18] [24].

This perspective invites leaders to reimagine schools not as spaces that erase identity, but as platforms where diverse identities are celebrated and leveraged for growth [81] [82]. The seeds of transformation are planted when leaders choose courage over compliance, compassion over control, and justice over convenience. The lived experiences of inequity in schools demonstrate how deeply systemic injustice is embedded in everyday practices. Scholars have long argued that schools reproduce social class through the "hidden curriculum," transmitting middle-class

norms of language, behavior, and cultural capital that disadvantage working-class and first-generation students [83] [84]. These inequities are not merely structural but are also enacted through daily microaggressions, subtle slights, stereotypes, and exclusions that signal to students of color and students with disabilities that they do not belong [85]. Research shows that such experiences erode students' academic identity [86], engagement [87], and reinforce patterns of underachievement [88]. Even in districts celebrated for progressive policies, racialized disciplinary disparities persist [89]. Gregory *et al.* demonstrate that implicit bias influences teacher perceptions of behavior, leading to disproportionate suspensions for Black students [90]. Globally, reports show that marginalized students, particularly girls, rural children, and children with disabilities, continue to face systemic barriers to access and completion, despite the promise of universal education policies [91]. These findings illustrate that inequity is not incidental but systemic, woven into policies, practices, and interactions that shape daily school life. Leaders must recognize that addressing inequity requires more than reforming policy; it requires reshaping the culture and structures of schooling.

6.5. Culturally Responsive Leadership in Practice

In one of the articles discussed in my PhD class, *Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices: A Principal's Reflection*, the author [92] asserted that culturally responsive leadership and teacher self-efficacy can serve as powerful countermeasures against the systemic inequities often perpetuated by rigid accountability mandates [92]. Through her personal experiences as a principal in a South Texas elementary school, the author [92] demonstrated how intentional leadership practices, such as valuing students' cultural wealth, empowering teachers, and fostering a sense of community, can lead to meaningful academic and social outcomes for high-needs students [93]. Her approach reflects a resistance to traditional top-down leadership models, instead embracing a collaborative and student-centered framework. This article resonates deeply with the broader discussion on challenging traditional notions of power, politics, and governance in education as revealed by [1]. I strongly support [92]'s argument, as it aligns with my own evolving understanding of leadership as a student. Her work underscores the importance of viewing leadership as a service-oriented and inclusive practice, one that prioritizes human connection over bureaucratic control. Undoubtedly, it compels us to question the role of policies that often emphasize compliance at the expense of equity and reminds us that transformative change is long overdue, and it begins with leaders who are willing to rethink the power dynamics within their schools.

The central proposition of culturally responsive leadership is that school leaders must intentionally create conditions where equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness guide all aspects of decision-making; it is about recognizing students' cultural assets, engaging families as partners, and challenging institutional structures that reproduce inequities [64] [94] [95]. It is evident that [92]'s emphasis on culturally responsive practices is not just beneficial but essential in today's increasingly

diverse educational landscape. At its heart, culturally responsive leadership challenges traditional power dynamics, which focus on equity, inclusion, and the empowerment of all stakeholders [96]. Studies indicate that when culturally responsive leadership is not upheld in schools, the consequences can be profound and far-reaching [97]. In support of this, the theory also aligns closely with the key features of CPA as outlined by [1], particularly its emphasis on centering the perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed. Clearly, without recognizing and valuing the diverse cultural identities and lived experiences of marginalized communities, schools risk becoming environments that perpetuate systemic inequities and alienate students from their learning experiences.

Research shows that students from underrepresented backgrounds may feel invisible, misunderstood or excluded, which may lead to disengagement, academic underperformance, and, in some cases, withdrawal from the educational system altogether [98]-[100]. The lack of inclusion negatively affects teachers and staff, who may feel unsupported in addressing the needs of a diverse student population [101]. One thing that stood out to me through class discussions with colleagues from different parts of the world is how universal these challenges are presented. In many contexts, schools remain grounded in dominant cultural norms, which often dictate policies, curriculum, and practices, leaving little room for alternative perspectives. Similarly, a colleague from Pakistan also recounted how students from underprivileged tribal areas often feel disconnected in mainstream urban schools where English-medium instruction and a curriculum modelled after Western ideals dominate. These narrations strongly confirm my position that the lack of cultural representation in schools disregards the unique heritage of marginalized students and fosters an environment where they feel undervalued and excluded. Hence, Khalifa posited that when culturally responsive leadership is adopted, it transforms schools into environments where diversity is honored, and every stakeholder, students, teachers, and families, feels empowered to make meaningful contributions [18].

I have come to know that upholding these principles is not merely an option but a necessity for creating equitable educational systems that nurture the potential of every student, regardless of their background. Through this lens, I contend that for school leaders to effectively address the unique needs of their school communities, they must be trained with culturally responsive principles. They must learn to recognize and value the diverse cultural identities and lived experiences of marginalized students. This training must ensure that leaders are not only advocates for equity but also skilled in implementing practices that affirm and uplift those who have historically been excluded. For me, this realization has underscored the importance of moving beyond traditional notions of leadership to adopt a more inclusive, empathetic, and transformative approach. Culturally responsive leadership is most visible in how leaders engage families, communities, and teachers. Ishimaru and Takahashi highlight how reciprocal partnerships with families of color counter deficit-based assumptions and strengthen student

outcomes [102]. Leaders must also reject “colorblind” ideologies, which, though framed as neutral, obscure systemic racism and prevent meaningful equity work [103]. Instead, professional development must help teachers confront biases and adopt culturally inclusive strategies [21] [104]. The impact of culturally responsive leadership is measurable. Khalifa demonstrates that schools adopting culturally responsive practices report improved climate, reduced racial discipline disparities, and narrowing achievement gaps [19]. Khalifa *et al.*, further argue that culturally responsive leaders do more than acknowledge difference, they create systemic structures that validate and sustain students’ cultural identities [94]. Absent these practices, schools risk disengagement, withdrawal, and the reproduction of inequality [98]. Effective leaders thus position cultural responsiveness not as an optional practice but as a cornerstone of equity-driven leadership.

7. Recommendations for Educational Leadership Scholarship

The analysis offered by the authors [1] in *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality* carries profound implications for educational leaders who are tasked with navigating and transforming schools within deeply inequitable social and political contexts. Leadership in the twenty-first century requires more than technical management. It demands a conscious and sustained commitment to justice, democracy, and human dignity [23] [25]. The following implications highlight the central responsibilities of equity-focused leaders and outline the practical, ethical, and political dimensions of their work.

7.1. Engage in Critical Self-Reflection and Positionality

A key implication is that leaders must engage in ongoing critical self-reflection about their own positionality. Leadership decisions are never neutral; they are informed by one’s race, class, gender, and professional background [18]. Leaders who fail to examine their privilege and biases risk perpetuating inequities unintentionally. For example, discipline policies that appear “neutral” often disproportionately harm students of color and students with disabilities, reflecting implicit biases in interpretation and enforcement [91] [105]. When we commit to reflexive practice, leaders can make more informed and just decisions, and ensure that their positionality becomes a resource for empathy rather than a barrier to equity.

7.2. Conduct and Act Upon Equity Audits

Educational leaders must adopt systematic tools such as equity audits to uncover hidden disparities in student achievement, access to advanced coursework, and disciplinary outcomes [16]. Importantly, equity audits should not be treated as one-time compliance exercises but as ongoing diagnostic processes that inform action plans. Leaders who integrate audit findings into strategic planning can challenge inequitable structures at the school and district level, ensuring that equity goals are embedded into the daily operations of schools. This requires courage

to confront uncomfortable truths and persistence to follow through on reforms [106].

7.3. Center Community Partnerships and Cultural Wealth

Another implication is that leaders must build authentic partnerships with families and communities, particularly those historically marginalized in decision-making. Research shows that families of color are often framed through deficit narratives, while their knowledge and cultural wealth are overlooked [22] [102]. Leaders must intentionally resist deficit framings by valuing the aspirational, familial, navigational, and resistant forms of capital that students and families bring to schools. Community partnerships must be reciprocal and rooted in respect, not tokenistic. This approach ensures that policies and practices reflect lived experiences, thereby increasing trust and collective investment in schools.

7.4. Reject Colorblindness and Embrace Culturally Sustaining Practices

Equity-focused leadership requires rejecting “colorblind” ideologies that dismiss the salience of race and thereby reinforce systemic inequities [103]. Leaders must instead embrace culturally responsive and sustaining practices that affirm and preserve student identities [19] [20]. This includes providing ongoing professional development for teachers to recognize cultural bias and adopt inclusive pedagogies [21]. Empirical studies confirm that schools adopting culturally responsive leadership practices experience stronger school climates, improved attendance, and reductions in racial achievement gaps [94] [95]. I believe that by making culture central to leadership, leaders can position equity not as an add-on but as integral to learning and achievement.

7.5. Reimage Democratic Participation in School Governance

The book makes clear that democratic ideals in education are often undermined by neoliberal reforms that prioritize efficiency and accountability over inclusion [3] [4]. Leaders must therefore reclaim democracy by creating participatory structures that meaningfully engage students, families, and communities in decision-making. Examples include participatory budgeting, school-community councils, and inclusive IEP processes where parents and students are active decision-makers [11] [12]. Leaders must also model democratic practices within schools, foster classroom cultures that encourage deliberation, civic dialogue, and collective problem-solving [13] [15]. These practices transform schools into living laboratories of democracy, preparing students not only for tests but for citizenship in a diverse and just society.

7.6. Advocate for Structural Change Beyond the Schoolhouse

Leaders cannot limit their focus to internal school reforms. As [9] argue, equity-focused leaders must also engage in broader policy advocacy, working with

legislators, policymakers, and community organizations to address structural issues such as inequitable funding formulas, accountability regimes, and school choice policies that reproduce segregation [9]. This advocacy requires leaders to take risks, as policy engagement often challenges entrenched political interests. Yet without structural reform, internal school changes are insufficient to dismantle systemic inequities. Leaders must therefore act as public intellectuals, amplifying voices from their communities in broader policy debates.

7.7. Adopt Trauma-Informed and Holistic Approaches

Another implication is the necessity of trauma-informed leadership. Inequities in schooling are not only academic but also deeply emotional. Students facing poverty, racism, and other systemic oppressions often carry trauma into classrooms, which impacts their ability to learn [107]. Leaders who adopt trauma-informed approaches provide structures of care, such as counseling, restorative practices, and wraparound services, that attend to students' holistic needs. Such approaches align with the ethic of care that Starratt describes as essential for ethical leadership [27].

8. Conclusion

The insights taken together, position the book as both a critical analysis and a call to action. Situating education within broader struggles over power and inequality, [1] remind us that schools are not merely places of instruction but arenas where democratic life is negotiated. For educational leaders, the message is clear: equity and democracy cannot remain aspirational. They must be actively cultivated through reflection, culturally responsive practice, and the courage to challenge structures that perpetuate injustice. In this way, the book contributes meaningfully to leadership scholarship while offering a framework for leaders committed to creating schools that embody justice, dignity, and hope. The global crises of the past decade, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and rising authoritarianism, have disproportionately impacted marginalized students, widening educational inequities worldwide [68]. These crises emphasize the urgency of [1] call for democratic, justice-oriented leadership. The book's argument resonates strongly in a moment when schools must serve not only as sites of academic instruction but also as anchors of democracy, resilience, and hope. The book's greatest strength lies in its dual focus: diagnosing structural inequalities while offering pathways for transformative change. Its lessons are equally relevant for policymakers, school leaders, and scholars committed to equity. The book positions educational leadership as a form of moral courage, an act of confronting inequity head-on, reimagining schools as places where democracy, dignity, and belonging are not aspirational but fundamental [1] [65].

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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