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# Educational leadership for social justice: A systematic review of empirical evidence

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## Abstract

Educational leadership for social justice is a recurrent educational theme and endeavour with significant implications for creating equitable and inclusive educational ecosystems where all children thrive. However, social justice constitutes an ontological stance that is interpreted, practiced and conceptualised in different ways across various contexts. This article documents a systematic review of empirical studies, including 124 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024, which were identified through searches in four databases: SCOPUS, Web of Science, Lens and ERIC. The findings of this review reveal that case studies and qualitative approaches are the most frequently employed research designs, though the study contexts show a notable lack of geographical diversity. Emerging themes highlight the role of culturally responsive leadership, the influence of personal and professional identities in leadership, and the tensions principals navigate between policy mandates and social justice commitments. We conclude with a critical analysis of these findings, whereby limitations and paradoxes are identified, and ways forward are advanced for a socially just leadership.

## KEYWORDS

culturally responsive leadership, educational equity, school leadership, social justice, systematic literature review

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## Context and implications

**Rationale for this study:** This study synthesises empirical evidence on educational leadership for social justice, which typically addresses systemic inequities and advocates for culturally responsive and decolonial leadership approaches.

**Why the new findings matter:** The findings highlight the common trends in empirical research on educational leadership for social justice in the past decade, and the major limitations and paradoxes in current research in this field.

**Implications for practitioners, policy makers and educators:** The implications of this review for practitioners and policymakers lie in offering a critical synthesis of extant literature and nuanced understandings of the limitations and tensions that remain unpacked. Some of these implications speak directly to principal preparation providers, accentuating the need for continuous leadership development in ways that support raising critical consciousness and awareness among school principals, so they become better prepared to address the emergence of social injustice issues in their school communities. The review also highlights the need for situating social justice as part of principal preparation programmes.

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents the findings of a systematic review on the body of literature that empirically brings together a focus on educational leadership and social justice. This work is informed by our sustained commitment to researching and identifying educational pathways that challenge what Kuby et al. (2018) refer to as 'cuts too small' with reference to educational arrangements and structures that do not accommodate the poor, the mobile, the marginalised, the multilingual and all those *Othered* students—commonly labelled as marginalised, minoritised, colonised and Indigenous. In doing so, this study synthesises and evaluates key insights from a range of international contexts that are similarly or differently impacted by structural injustices, oppressive epistemologies and narrow conceptualisations of justice in educational systems. Such injustices include enduring challenges of inequities that have yet to necessitate a critical (re/un)thinking of contemporary dominant paradigms, epistemologies and intellectual norms (Bainazarov et al., 2022; Wright, 2022). We describe these dominant Western knowledge systems as binary, hegemonic and individualistic, imposing their ways of being, knowing and thinking onto other peoples and communities, without regard to alternative values, beliefs, traditions and norms (Arar et al., 2023; Dei et al., 2002; Romanowski et al., 2023), nor do they acknowledge the harms they constitute through the reproduction of such ways (Chaaban, 2024). We maintain the view that current educational and knowledge systems remain integral to reproducing intersecting forms of epistemological hegemony and the associated silences and erasures that come with them (Giroux, 2024; Nxumalo, 2019). As educators, we are required to ask: Whose voices are attended to and reproduced in our educational systems and processes? Who benefits from the current arrangements? Who is harmed by what we know and what we do not know? Where is educational leadership located? How is it practiced in ways that challenge the status quo and dismantle injustice? These questions sit at the heart of educational leadership for social justice as we demonstrate in this work.

In agreement with Collet-Sabé and Ball (2023), the modern-day school is an incubator for hegemonic knowledge systems, where White Eurocentric epistemologies are normalised,

producing inequitable, unjust and hostile practices against *Othered* individuals and communities. Such ontological and epistemological arrangements contribute to 'the displacement of community learning, local customs and ties based on family, neighbourhood, place, craft and faith' whereby the school, the community and the individual operate in isolated spheres that are artificially brought together under neoliberal aspirations of knowledge, skills and entrepreneurial targets that are stubbornly tied to reproducing hegemonic Whiteness in education. Through this review, we shed light on international imaginings of alternative perspectives on educational leadership that are culturally responsive and socially just; a kind of leadership that wrestles with ingrained systemic inequities and injustices, and persistent structural barriers faced by children and youth in marginalised, colonised and Indigenous communities (Benham & Murakami-Ramvalho, 2010; Oplatka & Arar, 2016). Accordingly, we adopt the stance of critical theory, revealing epistemic and theoretical gaps in the educational leadership field, while critiquing dominant educational constructions of leadership. This approach fosters intellectual debates on the many injustices not only practiced in our schools, but also those that constitute the very outcomes of schooling (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2023).

The role of leadership is fundamental to ensuring that educational practices and structures are intentionally designed and implemented with a focus on equity and the attainment of social justice (Ezzani et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2019). Theoharis (2007) positions educational leadership 'at the front line in transforming schools into more equitable and just places' (p. 250) and emphasises the responsibility of leaders to actively drive systemic change for marginalised students as a form of resistance against entrenched inequalities in school systems. This vision aligns with culturally responsive leadership (CRL), which is defined as an equity-focused approach that prioritises inclusion and supports historically marginalised communities through valuating their cultural and linguistic identities (Khalifa et al., 2016). Unlike traditional leadership models that are characterised by hierarchical, top-down decision-making and a focus on managerial efficiency (Larson & Murtadha, 2002), CRL aligns with socially just leadership, both being foreground dialogical and community-centred practices that reflect an ontological stance, whereby leaders' ways of being and knowing challenge colonial and hegemonic structures and redirect education toward collective equity and justice (Khalifa et al., 2019). Such educational leadership, as Theoharis (2007) envisions, embraces linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, and promotes environments that acknowledge and value diverse cultural backgrounds, inclusivity and fairness (Arar et al., 2019; Khalifa et al., 2019; Shahade, 2017), in the pursuit of collective thriving, communal healing, remembering and connecting (Badwan, 2021; Bang, 2020). Accordingly, educational leadership for social justice, driven by a moral commitment to equity (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014), is neither passive nor a one-time endeavour, and involves persistent, deliberate interventions that adapt to changing circumstances (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007). As Larson and Murtadha (2002) further elaborate, such leadership rejects the rigid, authority-driven structures of traditional models and instead integrates values of care, compassion and critical consciousness to serve the public good and promote social change. We must therefore recognise that justice is an ongoing state of struggle and is never a finished state. This requires leaders to navigate resistance and reimagine educational futures and structures with moral clarity and contextual sensitivity (Bogotch, 2002).

This article is a systematic review of international empirical findings from the educational leadership literature that focuses on inclusive, equitable, culturally responsive and socially just approaches to leadership. Central to its design is that it explicitly acknowledges diverse knowledge systems and alternative perspectives while acknowledging the inherent limitations imposed by the publishing industry that privileges certain genres and ways of knowledge production. The review focuses on empirical studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals between 2014 and 2024. First, we have observed a rise in educational scholarship on socially just (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Theoharis, 2007) and culturally

responsive leadership (Gümüş et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016), recognising the injustices experienced by minoritised children and communities in diverse educational contexts (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). We have also observed a rise in educational scholarship on decolonising school leadership (Ezzani et al., 2023; Khalifa et al., 2019), acknowledging the centrality of Indigenous perspectives and promoting educational justice for colonised communities. By 'Indigenous' we draw on Dei et al. (2002) and Khalifa et al.'s (2019) use of the term to refer to non-White, non-Western ways of being and knowing, which often stand at odds with imposed colonial worldviews and practices. By synthesising diverse perspectives and findings from multiple studies, this review aims to provide critical insights for practitioners, policymakers and professional development providers working toward creating inclusive, just and equitable educational futures. We adopt a multi-dimensional approach to conceptualising social justice as it provides a unique lens through which we can critically examine and challenge the dominant narratives and practices in educational leadership, contributing to more diverse and equitable public discourses. The research questions that have guided this review are: (1) What are the common trends in empirical research on educational leadership for social justice in the past decade? and (2) What are the major limitations and paradoxes in current research on educational leadership for social justice?

The systematic review is structured into five primary sections: First, we provide our conceptualisations of social justice. Then, we offer a summary of past systematic reviews that have explored similar terminologies and highlight the distinct focus of this systematic literature review. Then, we describe the methods and inclusion criteria used to select the papers included in our review. In the fourth section, we share the findings of our review, noting new insights and emerging trends in extant literature. Finally, we conclude with addressing limitations and paradoxes in the reviewed literature while proposing new avenues and provocations for advancing leadership research in pursuit of socially just educational futures.

## CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

It is worth noting that our conceptualisations of social justice do not sit neatly within specific frameworks or theorisations; a position that we utilise to develop expansive conceptualisations and imaginings. Therefore, we draw on a number of theoretical perspectives to operationalise our exploration of what social justice might mean in the context of educational leadership. For instance, we draw on Fraser's (2020) three-dimensional model of redistribution of cultural and material resources, cultural recognition and political representation, which has remained influential for understanding matters of justice in educational scholarship. That said, we go beyond Fraser's model in bringing inspiration from critical literacy scholarship (Janks, 2004; Simon, 1992) to work with four main dimensions, namely *domination* that explicitly raises awareness about power structures and dominant discourses, *access* that redistributes dominant language and culture, *diversity* that contributes to cultural making of new practices and discourses, and finally *redesign* of social realities and futures to change the horizon of possibility (Kostogriz, 2002; Simon, 1992). Using this critical lens, we interrogate oppressive power structures and explore how school principals contribute to reinforcing or challenging hegemonic norms.

Informing the interpretation of our findings, we also draw on the work of de Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015) who sketch a social cartography of the paradoxes and multiplicities associated with the coloniality of educational structures. Among the different readings and possibilities, they discuss avenues for system critique (i.e., system hacking) and risky system experimentations (i.e., system hospicing), while alerting that some oppressive structures might indeed sit within a beyond-reform space. In addition, we expand our understanding

of social justice by bringing in a lens that analyses educational interventionist approaches through the notions of simple and complex equality (Gale, 2000; Walzer, 1983), whereby the former assumes that individuals have the same basic needs, and the latter maintains that different identity groups require different forms of empowerment. We employ these notions of simple and complex equality to interpret how school principals navigate uniform versus differentiated approaches to equity, inclusion and justice. In addition, we expand our understanding of social justice by incorporating the work of Ladson-Billings (1995), who emphasises that culturally relevant pedagogy, grounded in the lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of marginalised groups, is essential for meaningful educational intervention. Ladson-Billings challenges the assumption that a one-size-fits-all approach to education can achieve equity, advocating instead for pedagogical practices that empower diverse learners by honouring their unique histories, identities and epistemologies. Indeed, many of these frameworks speak to one another with conceptual synergies around (re)imagining social justice practices in educational systems.

The themes of culture, cultural identities and culturally responsive pedagogies offer important contributions to expanding our lexicon around educational leadership for social justice. It is important to pay attention to how culture is invoked, or as Piller (2017) puts it, '[w]ho makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?' (p. 2). Additionally, essentialist approaches to culture—which stem from functionalist tendencies and stable stereotypical imaginings of cultural homogeneity within groups—continue to shape how culture, cultural identities and community dynamics are discussed in educational settings. Likewise, the narrow and fixed conceptualisations of culture in educational systems inform cultural tokenism that is often used to create the illusion that cultural representation and recognition are established (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013). In our critical appraisal of the relevant literature, we draw on non-essentialist understandings of culture that treat it as a verb, as something we do and as something that is done to us (Badwan, 2021; Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017). Such rich and dynamic understandings of culture are aligned with culturally sustaining pedagogies as perceived by Alim and Paris (2017) when they envisioned 'pedagogies that go with the flow' (p. 9), responding to the shifting cultural realities of the intersecting racial and ethnic recombinations that affect children and young people and their communities as they navigate educational systems dominated by the White gaze. Combined, these theoretical frameworks position social justice as a multi-dimensional endeavour that resists simple conceptualisations, as Bogotch (2002) argues, 'there can be no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices' (p. 153).

## PREVIOUS SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS

There is extensive literature on various forms of educational leadership, encompassing socially just and culturally responsive leadership, with relatively few systematic reviews that address how educational leadership can be structured and implemented in ways that promote social justice. This lack of focused scholarly attention is noteworthy given the interrelations of educational leadership with possibilities for socially just environments for diverse learners. This section reviews key prior systematic reviews to contextualise our study and highlight their contributions, limitations and the gaps they leave unaddressed.

The review by Khalifa et al. (2019) included 35 sources that critically examined the colonial origins of schooling and advocated for incorporating Indigenous perspectives. The authors synthesised their findings into an Indigenous, Decolonising School Leadership (IDSL) framework, and developed five strands: (1) prioritisation of self-knowledge and self-reflection, (2) empowerment of community through self-determination, (3) centring of community voices



and values, (4) service based in altruism and spirituality, and (5) approaching collectivism through inclusive communication practices. While this review provided a critique of Eurocentric schooling as a tool of imperialism and colonisation, it did not explicitly connect these insights with social justice practices and their practical implications.

In another systematic literature review, Flood et al. (2023) analysed 29 peer-reviewed articles from the International School Leadership Development Network (2010–2021) to explore the practical role of school principals in effecting social justice across various cultural and national contexts. Using a micro-meso-macro theoretical framework, the authors concluded that a principal's innate characteristics and their fidelity in implementing educational policies are more important in promoting social justice than external policies and settings. However, the lack of representation of sampled countries and the selection of articles from one network limited the scope and the diversity of perspectives and contexts explored in this review.

Another relevant review comes from Gümüş et al. (2021) who reviewed international research on leadership for social justice, equity and diversity from 1980 to 2018 using bibliographic data from the Scopus database. Their review identified key scholars, trends and the geographical distribution of social justice leadership studies. The study highlighted a surge in publications post-2005, with most studies originating from Western countries, such as the United States, though contributions from non-Western countries have recently emerged. It also noted a shift toward more contemporary issues like culturally responsive leadership and moral leadership. However, the reliance on a single database, while extensive, has omitted some key sources in the field, particularly neglecting the unique challenges and perspectives from non-Western countries.

More aligned with the purpose of this study, Khalifa et al.'s (2016) systematic literature review on Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) from 1989 to 2014 underscored the significant role of school leadership in creating culturally responsive environments that enhance student engagement and achievement, particularly minoritised students. The specific leadership behaviours identified as essential in fostering a culturally responsive school environment included promoting inclusive school policies, engaging with the community, and implementing practices that directly address the cultural, academic and social–emotional needs of students. The authors traced the evolution of the field of CRSL from a focus on individual leader characteristics to systemic practices that principals could implement to support culturally responsive education. The specific CRSL behaviours that centre inclusion, equity, advocacy and social justice in schools were identified as promoting an inclusive school climate, implementing equitable practices and policies, advocating for marginalised communities, building relationships with the community, engaging in professional development on cultural competency, fostering critical self-awareness and reflection, and empowering through decision-making. While significant, the study's scope was limited to 2014; therefore, it has not included recent developments, and it only prioritised cultural responsiveness over the broader social justice lens.

The current systematic literature review aims to address the limitations of these previous reviews. To this end, we focus on synthesising the interrelationships between CRSL, decolonial approaches and social justice leadership across diverse global contexts. We also seek to challenge geographical and methodological biases that tend to over rely on Western contexts or single databases in order to shed light on the complexities of leadership in non-Western and postcolonial settings. Therefore, this systematic review offers a comprehensive synthesis of empirical research from 2014 to 2024 across four databases, while drawing on an expansive conceptual framework of analysis and synthesis, joining CRSL, decolonial leadership and social justice leadership, through including such concepts as keywords in our search strategy. This work, we argue, is important for disrupting colonial and hegemonic discourses that confine educational leadership to certain conceptualisations and localities.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review aims to comprehensively analyse and synthesise existing research on educational leadership for social justice and its entanglements with issues related to culturally responsive, socially just and decolonising school leadership. Guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Statement (Moher et al., 2015), and an iterative selection of literature based on relevance and quality, we identified studies from four databases: SCOPUS, Web of Science, Lens and ERIC. Using clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria facilitated the identification and consequent analysis of leadership practices that respect and integrate diverse knowledge systems and perspectives. The methodology ensured that the findings reflect current international evidence and contribute significantly to discourses on educational leadership for social justice in school settings.

Literature search and screening strategy

The search strategy was designed to capture a broad spectrum of literature related to educational leadership that promotes inclusivity, decoloniality, equity and social justice. The databases were searched individually for publications using initial key terms and their combinations, namely ‘culturally responsive leadership’, ‘socially just leadership’, ‘educational equity’, ‘social justice’, ‘educational leadership’, ‘colonialism’, ‘decolonisation’ and ‘indigenous learners’. We aimed to capture diverse search terms that are commonly used in the literature by screening the titles from this initial search. The key terms used in this systematic literature review are shown in Table 1. Using these key terms, we searched the four databases using the Boolean phrase AND between search categories and OR within each search category. A total of 4857 records were retrieved across the databases, and bibliographic details of the articles were exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for further assessment. We first removed 2329 duplicates and screened 2528 articles, which were considered in the next phase of this review. Article author(s), title, source, abstract and date were screened for eligibility according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria explained below.

TABLE 1 Key terms used in the systematic search for relevant literature.

Search term category (joined with AND)	Search terms in title (joined with OR)
Key terms related to leadership	'socially just leadership' OR 'culturally responsive leadership' OR 'culturally relevant leadership' OR 'culturally sustainable leadership' OR 'indigenous leadership' OR 'community-based leadership' OR 'decolonising school leadership' OR 'school leadership' OR 'educational leadership' OR 'school administration' OR 'school management' OR 'school principal' OR 'principal' OR 'leader'
Key terms related to educational justice	'social justice' OR 'injustice' OR 'equity' OR 'educational equity' OR 'inequity' OR 'equality' OR 'inequality' OR 'diversity' OR 'student diversity' OR 'diverse learners' OR 'cultural differences' OR 'ethnic diversity' OR 'disadvantaged' OR 'race' OR 'gender' OR 'socio-economic status' or 'disability' OR 'access' OR 'language learner' OR 'multicultural education' OR 'minority' OR 'marginalised' OR 'inclusive education' OR 'inclusion' OR 'indigenous' OR 'indigenous student' OR 'indigeneity' or 'indigenous communities' OR 'decolonised' OR 'decolonisation'



## Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In this phase, we undertook an initial screening of the 2528 studies to ensure relevance and adherence to our inclusion criteria, and in response to our research questions. We decided to include all peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2014 and 2024. The ten-year range ensured a long time frame to trace the development of trends and practices fit for the review's purpose. Within this period, literature was included in light of the following criteria:

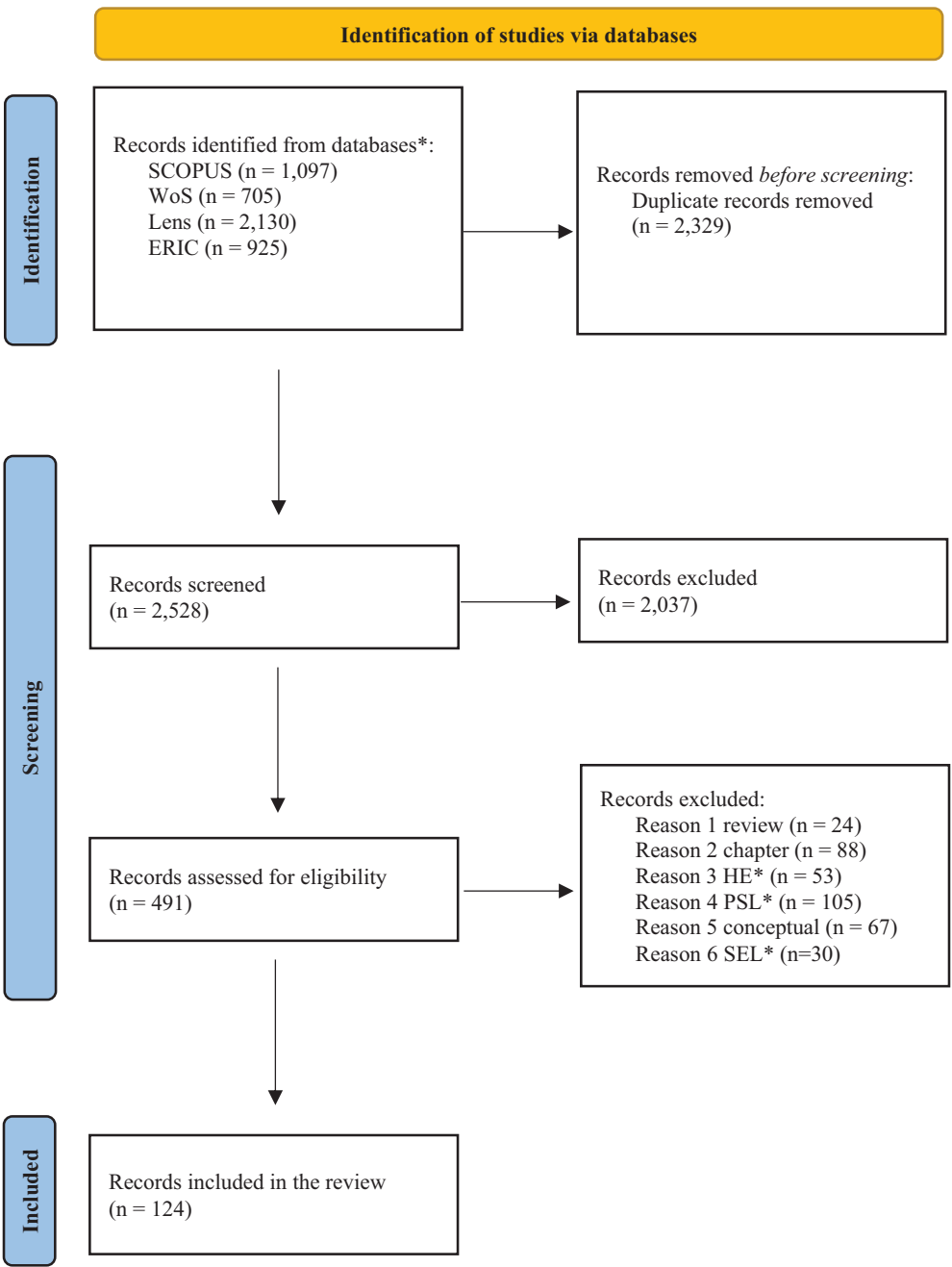
1. The work is a peer-reviewed article that documents empirical analyses. Therefore, conference proceedings, reports and book chapters were excluded. Systematic literature reviews were also excluded, though they were used to identify key terms related to this systematic review.
2. The work is conducted in a mainstream school context, with school principals and other educational stakeholders. We excluded studies that were located within special education and early years contexts, due to the particularities of their settings, including specific structural, pedagogical arrangements, statutory requirements, funding nuances, and policy frameworks that distinguish these specialist settings from mainstream schools. We further excluded studies that included pre-service principals as participants.
3. The literature search is specifically and substantially focused on at least one of the key terms from each of the two search categories listed in [Table 1](#). Therefore, articles that included mainly background work on educational leadership or social justice—without going into the interactions and entanglements of the two key terms and their variations—were excluded.

Based on these criteria, we individually screened the titles of the included studies and excluded 2037 studies, resulting in a total of 491 articles that underwent another round of screening. During this round, we individually screened the title and abstract of these articles and coded them using a 3-2-1 legend (i.e., 3=exclude, 2=maybe, and 1=include). Attending to the same criteria above, our deliberations resulted in the exclusion of a further 367 articles for reasons detailed in [Figure 1](#).

## Thematic coding

The thematic coding involved a two-phase process. In Phase 1, we sought to identify descriptive information about each article, including the year of publication, the context of the study and the research design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods). These details are documented in [Figures 2–4](#). Additionally, we documented the analysed studies in [Appendix A](#) for quick reference. This process provided a succinct summary of each article, as well as a collective overview of the included papers.

We found that papers included in this review provided important insights, shaped by differences in their publication year, geographical context and research design. The distribution of publications by year indicated a fluctuating yet overall sustained interest in the field, with notable peaks in 2020 (19 articles) and 2021 (18 articles). However, there is a concerning trend of declining research interest post-2021, with only 15 articles published in 2023, suggesting a potential waning focus on culturally relevant and socially just literature in relation to educational leadership (see [Figure 2](#)). This decline may reflect, in part, the contentious climate toward Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the United States, which may have deterred publications amid increasing political instability and heightened neoliberal interventions in education policy. On a global scale, this trend could also have



**FIGURE 1** PRISMA chart. HE, higher education; PSL, pre-service leadership; SEL, special education leadership.

stemmed from a delayed effect due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which left schools closed throughout 2020–2021. These interpretations warrant further investigation to clarify such shifts in the field’s publication history. The reviewed research was primarily from the United States, where 50 articles were located. This was followed by Australia with 12, Canada with 10 and New Zealand with seven publications. Türkiye was the only non-Western study context with five publications, more than all other countries from the Global South (see

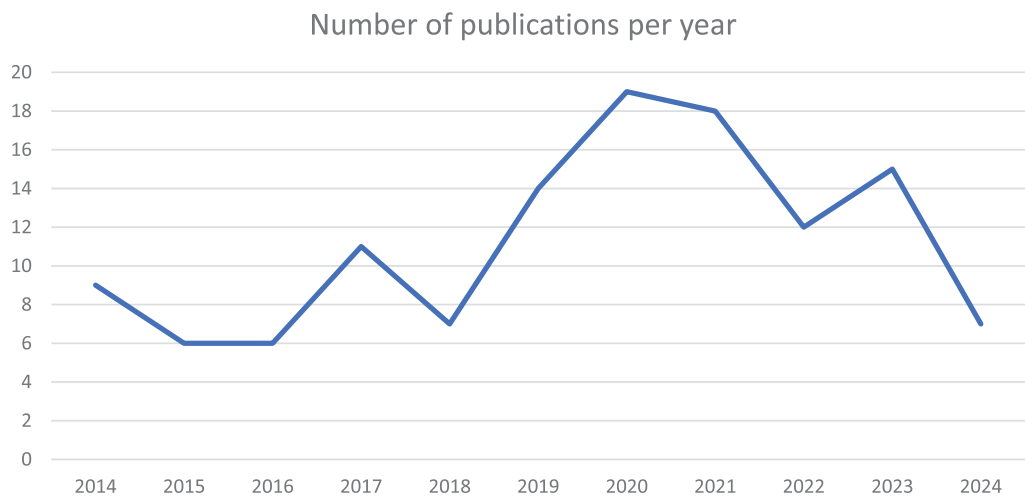


FIGURE 2 Number of publications per year.

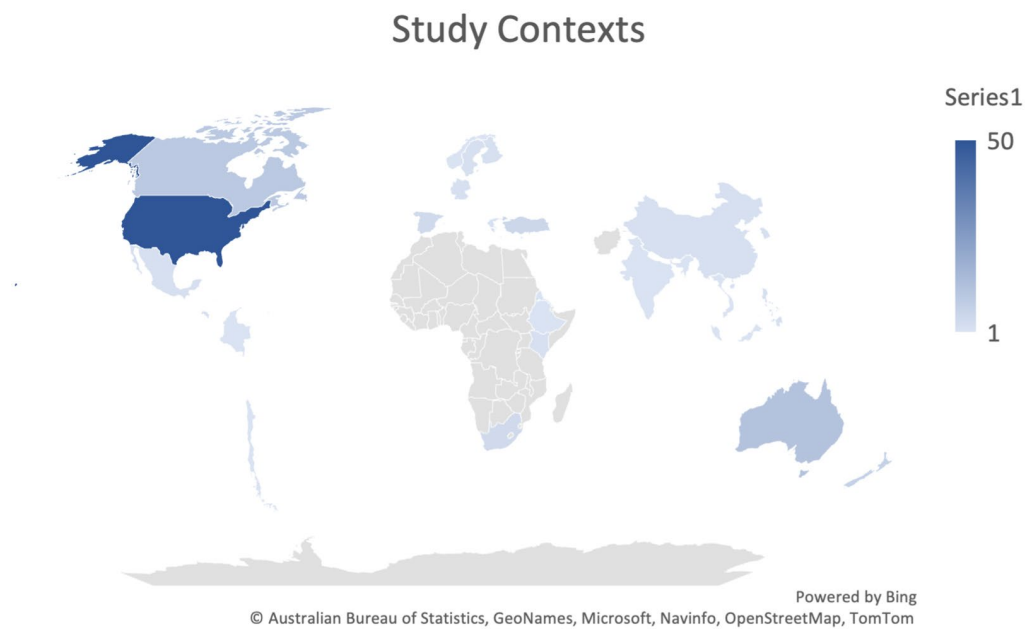


FIGURE 3 Number of publications per study context.

Figure 3). Regarding research design, case studies were the most frequent with 54 examples, followed by (unspecified) qualitative methods (33 articles), phenomenology (11 articles), narrative (10 articles), ethnography (two articles) and action research (one article)-see Figure 4. Additionally, seven papers utilised mixed methods, and three studies employed quantitative designs.

Phase 2 of the thematic coding aimed to address the first research question, namely the common trends in current research on educational leadership for social justice. Similar to Rowan et al. (2021), we followed a cyclical, iterative and inductive process that entailed

Publications per research design

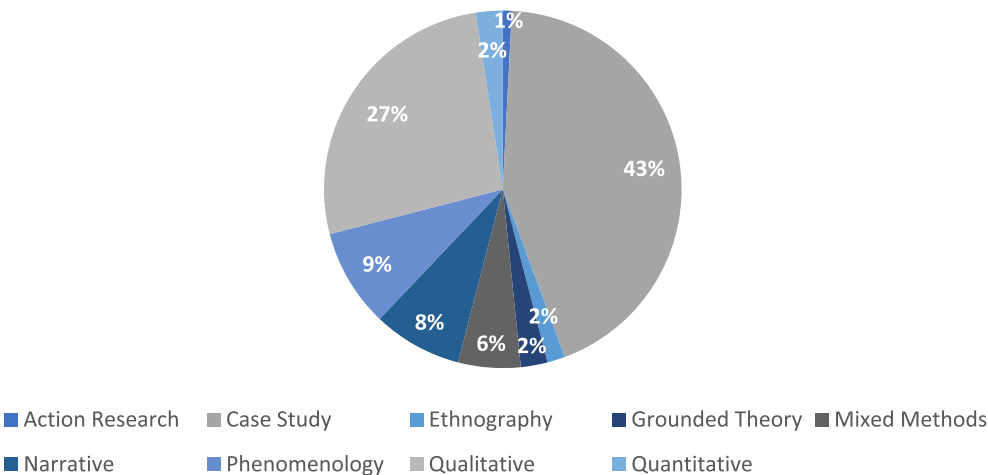


FIGURE 4 Number of publications per research design.

reading the full manuscript of each paper, and coding separate sections based on how they approached the research questions on common trends and limitations of research on educational leadership for social justice. After this initial coding, we focused on clustering related codes into categories and then grouping these categories under main thematic headings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023; Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). Common codes included axiology, identity, policy implementation, transformative leadership, distributive leadership and whiteness. We held deliberation sessions after each round of analysis to discuss codes, categories and emerging themes. During these sessions, we also negotiated the labelling of the themes, justified their selection and agreed on the availability of sufficient data to support them from at least 20 studies per theme. Some codes, such as *time and resource constraints*, *professional development initiative*, and *creating safe spaces*, did not fit within the themes and were discarded given the vast number of examined papers and their variations in topic and scope. For each theme, we provided an explanation of its scope and cited a representative sample of papers that address the theme explicitly. We opted to respond to the second research question in the discussion section, highlighting major limitations and paradoxes which would allow us to suggest ways forward in advancing this area of research.

RESULTS

In response to the first research question, we identified three themes and eight sub-themes. Each theme described below is exemplified with reference to relevant papers indexed numerically in Appendix A.

Theme 1: Through the lens of culturally responsive leadership

Culturally responsive leadership (CRL) emerges as a primary framework within educational leadership for social justice, with many studies referring to school principals who have adopted practices that actively recognise, value and respond to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students. The studies included in this review conceptualise

CRL as an equity-focused approach that prioritises inclusion (study 2; 18; 34), addresses systemic inequities (study 3; 6; 25; 39; 47; 61; 69; 75; 77; 90; 93), and supports historically marginalised communities (study 3; 8; 9; 25; 34; 35; 44; 68; 73; 77; 93; 109). This theme presents the various conceptualisations of CRL and the ways it is enacted in practice along three sub-themes: (1) CRL grounded in critical race theory and differing leadership models, (2) CRL requiring cultural awareness and critical consciousness, and (3) CRL sustainability-dependent upon collaboration and reciprocity. While these sub-themes are presented separately to allow a closer analysis of how they are perceived and enacted, we maintain the view that they are not mutually exclusive, and some practices may indeed sit at the boundaries between these different sub-themes.

## CRL grounded in critical race theory and differing leadership models

CRL is frequently framed through the combined lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT), and various leadership models which we describe as *differing*; that is leadership theorisations and practices that deviate from traditional leadership models. Several studies argue that CRT provides a necessary foundation for understanding how race and racism are deeply embedded in educational systems and how these systems perpetuate disparities, particularly for historically marginalised students (study 2; 22; 34). Many studies also maintain that CRL, as conceptualised through CRT, requires school principals to actively confront and dismantle these inequities by engaging in critical and courageous conversations about race, culture and power (study 2; 4; 73; 75). In these studies, school principals are found to challenge deficit thinking and advocate for inclusive, equitable policies that support students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (study 3; 8; 69).

Several studies also suggest that distributed leadership complements CRT by promoting collaborative decision-making processes. Rather than centralising leadership in the hands of a single individual, these studies commend distributed leadership's inherent engagement of a broad array of stakeholders, including teachers, parents and community members (study 6; 11; 40; 62; 112). In an example from Ireland (study 6), for instance, distributed leadership practices are shown to advocate inclusive and culturally responsive school environments through establishing a buddying and peer tuition programme, introducing a set of visual cues and emojis to facilitate communication, involving parents in school decision-making through the parent council, and celebrating students' cultural backgrounds. These practices are found to be effective in promoting shared responsibility among teachers and the broader community, thus addressing the diverse needs of the school's multicultural student population, specifically immigrant students (study 7). Further, study 40 shows how the integration of mainstream and Indigenous cultural knowledge is made possible through the active participation of community members, who co-lead decision-making and educational practices. Community expertise is invested in ways that facilitate and support student learning.

According to several studies, transformational leadership, another key leadership model, is considered necessary for inspiring and motivating school communities toward a shared vision of equity and inclusion. These studies maintain that transformational leaders foster a sense of trust, collaboration and empowerment among their staff and students, and drive long-term, systemic change in schools (study 24; 25; 29; 31; 46; 58; 64; 115). In these studies, transformational leadership is seen as necessary to achieving social justice in education. For example, during times of social unrest and crisis—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—urban school principals who employed transformational leadership are found to navigate the heightened challenges faced by their predominantly Black and Brown student populations by allowing open dialogues about race, providing culturally responsive professional development, and ensuring emotional and mental health support for both teachers

and students (study 6). In another example, a study of three urban school principals reports how transformational leadership allowed them to address the needs of their demographically shifting student populations, due to national and global crises, such as immigration and displacement (study 31). In this study, participants are found to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that generate inequity, incorporate community capital and resources into the working fabric of their schools, and support students in having considerable control over their learning experiences. The authors caution, however, that unless mindsets change, including overcoming implicit bias and deficit assumptions, then equity, inclusion and social justice will remain illusory (study 31).

CRL is also conceptualised with other models that emphasise the importance of challenging existing structures of power and privilege. For instance, school principals grounded in CRT are seen to utilise Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), depicted as a form of cultural capital held by marginalised communities (study 3). These few studies focus on Latinx school administrators who leverage their personal and community experiences to challenge systemic barriers and advocate for fairer educational practices (study 3; 43). For example, Latinx school principals in the Pacific Northwest are depicted as drawing upon their CCW to disrupt dominant deficit narratives and create school environments that celebrate the cultural assets of their students (study 3). This approach is commended as allowing them to harness the strength and resilience of their communities as tools for advancing educational equity (study 43), as a form of context-sensitive and responsive leadership to cultural diversity.

Overall, these studies contend that combining CRT with these differing leadership models provides a robust framework of educational leadership for social justice. While CRT offers a critical lens for understanding and addressing systemic inequities, distributed leadership emphasises the importance of shared responsibility and collaboration in promoting cultural inclusivity, while transformative leadership empowers school principals to inspire and enact long-term, equitable change. However, there is concern that educational leadership for social justice risks being diluted when it is reduced to solely addressing cultural responsiveness. At the same time, valuable, culturally responsive leadership does not always fully encompass the systemic, political and structural dimensions of inequity that educational leadership for social justice seeks to address. What is needed is further theorisation of educational leadership for social justice that goes beyond cultural inclusivity, as we discuss in more detail below.

## CRL requiring cultural awareness and critical consciousness

CRL, as discussed in multiple studies, is frequently framed as requiring a deep sense of cultural awareness and the continuous development of critical consciousness among school principals. Without necessarily delving into the contentious definitions of culture (study 35 being the exception)—an aspect we debate in the discussion section—many researchers argue that school principals who are culturally responsive engage in practices that recognise and value the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students (study 2; 7; 34; 41; 74; 112), and integrate this critical awareness into their leadership strategies (study 3; 25; 40; 90). This emphasis on cultural awareness and critical consciousness signifies the importance of school principals moving beyond surface-level and tokenistic acknowledgements of diversity and embedding these cultural understandings into the everyday policies and practices of the school environment (study 4; 8; 22; 35; 113).

Several studies claim that school principals who exhibit a strong sense of cultural awareness tend to recognise the cultural and linguistic diversity present in their schools and actively incorporate this understanding into decision-making and curriculum development



(study 8; 22; 25; 42; 61; 68). According to study 8, these principals are not afraid of challenging Eurocentric curricula, despite the likelihood of offending 'powerful constituents' (p. 368). In study 22, cultural awareness also means framing opportunities for leadership around Indigenous structures appropriate to the local context, which in this case requires a process of collective effort, constructed within the beliefs and values of Indigenous worldviews. This emphasis on cultural context can also be seen in study 35, where rapidly changing demographics and spaces call for seeing culture as an active force of political, social and economic change, beyond mere celebration and embracing of diversity (35). Study 40 further suggests that at the core of CRL is the 'creation of an *intercultural* space, where both cultures (home and school) are linked, listening and learning from each other' (p. 19). Educational leadership is thus seen at the intersection of cultures, and school principals are seen interacting within these intercultural spaces, valuing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural knowledge based on reciprocity (study 40). One must be careful, however, not to oversimplify the need for and manifestation of cultural awareness, particularly in contexts where refugee and immigrant students and families are 'integrated' through assimilation into educational systems (study 47; 69; 113), a theme we elaborate on in the next section.

Another important aspect of CRL is the development of critical consciousness, which involves school principals' awareness of the history and detrimental impact of societal inequities, and their engagement in critical self-reflection to challenge their own biases and assumptions (study 8; 35; 36; 43; 90). Commonly used frameworks are Horsford et al.'s (2011) and Khalifa et al.'s (2016), both foregrounding critical self-reflection as one of four major sets of leadership behaviour. This reflective practice is central to sustaining CRL, as it encourages school principals to examine the ways in which their leadership practices may inadvertently perpetuate inequities (study 35; 36). Study 8 summons Freire's (2000) notion of 'conscientização' as relevant 'because it stresses self-awareness in relation to knowledge of how the oppressed must learn about the social, political and economic contradictions affecting their lives' (p. 368). This study concludes by reinstating the importance of *corrective reflection*, a form of self-reflection that enables school principals to remain vigilant against slipping into practices that may harm marginalised students and communities. This type of reflection necessitates the continuous examination of emergent biases and the focus on core values, with a clear moral compass in the face of overwhelming pressures. Study 44 warns against the harmful impact of the absence of critical consciousness that can be linked to unchallenged biases and outdated pedagogies. The study demonstrates how school principals in the Philippines were guilty of reinforcing social divisions and perpetuating the status quo of marginalisation which disadvantaged many students.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that CRL is not simply about acknowledging cultural differences but about actively engaging in practices that challenge systemic inequities (study 8; 35; 75). By embracing cultural awareness and critical consciousness, school leaders are shown to question their practices, disrupt the status quo, value the knowledge that diverse learners bring, and take conscious action in response to inequities (study 35).

## CRL sustainability dependent upon collaboration and reciprocity

The sub-theme of collaboration and capacity-building is often cited as important to the sustainability of CRL. Numerous studies highlight that CRL principals focus on supporting families and communities, and empowering teachers to foster the growth of a school-wide capacity for inclusivity and social justice (study 9; 35; 93; 104; 112). Rather than addressing social justice issues individually, these school principals aim to create sustainable, long-term change. Therefore, they work to build the skills and confidence of both school community

members and external partners and encourage collective engagement in social justice practices (study 8; 40; 47; 75).

Several studies suggest that school principals who prioritise the capacity-building of teachers do so by modelling principles of social justice, such as a flexible and values-driven mindset (study 8, 9), incorporating teachers in decision-making (study 34) and providing ongoing professional development that promotes culturally responsive pedagogies (study 68), such as training on bilingual education, social and emotional teaching strategies and group problem-solving strategies (study 8). For example, in the case of STEM programmes in the Southwest US Border region, principals are depicted as actively fostering inclusive environments by engaging teachers in reflective practices that address equity and access. They incorporate teachers in decision-making processes, particularly those related to curriculum design, and ensure that instructional strategies are tailored to the needs of underserved groups, such as girls from Hispanic backgrounds (study 34).

Collaboration is not limited to teachers; culturally responsive school principals also focus on building and maintaining strong relationships with families (study 7; 8; 35; 47). For example, in one study, a school principal collaborated with her staff to establish a book club where parents, many of whom were newcomers to the country, read with their children at school. In another case, a principal took on the responsibility of advocating for families struggling with life circumstances, connecting them with the resources they need to be fully engaged in their children's education (study 8). According to study 35, examples such as these tap into families' funds of knowledge, gained through their life experiences, and provide many possibilities for positive pedagogical actions. This is particularly evident in studies where school principals particularly serve refugee, minority and immigrant populations (study 7; 8; 47). In study 47, CRL for Syrian refugee students emphasises the importance of building strong relationships with families. One principal implemented adult education courses for both Syrian and Turkish parents, including Turkish language courses and vocational training to support family engagement. This initiative, which also included free childcare, helped parents actively participate in their children's education while addressing their livelihood needs.

Collaboration in CRL is often linked to community engagement as well, including local universities, organisations and community members. School principals are portrayed as working closely with community members to build a sense of collective responsibility for student success (study 17; 22; 40; 104, 112). Research on remote school principals in Australia illustrates the importance of collaboration with Indigenous community leaders. In these settings, principals work alongside Indigenous leaders to integrate Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge into culturally relevant literacy programmes, supported by the local university. By sharing leadership and decision-making, these partnerships are shown to enable the school and community to collaborate through culturally responsive teaching practices that cultivate mutual respect and trust (study 39) and reportedly improve student literacy outcomes (study 40).

In reciprocity, the journey of leading for cultural responsiveness is depicted as being emotionally and professionally daunting and school principals are heard voicing their need for support. Participants in study 35 emphasise the importance of having a community of 'critical friends'—a supportive network where leaders can share their vulnerabilities, discuss challenges and find emotional and professional support. Whether from within or outside the school, this support network helps principals navigate resistance to culturally responsive practices, prevents feelings of isolation and sustains their commitment to social justice. Additionally, these collaborations provide principals with role models, mentorship and networking, which are necessary for their thriving and retention. The existence of these relationships positions them to promote cultural 'revitalisation and rejuvenation' within their schools and communities, and empowers them to drive meaningful, long-lasting change (study 104, p. 700).

In sum, by investing in the development of teachers, students and communities, CRL is believed to create a foundation for lasting social change that addresses immediate disparities and is assumed to dismantle systemic inequities over time.

## Theme 2: Leadership rooted in personal identity

Many of the articles in this review feature practices of educational leadership for social justice from principals whose personal and professional identities are connected in ways that promote commitment to social justice. Several studies suggest that many school principals draw on their lived experiences and histories of marginalisation to inform their leadership practices in pursuit of social justice (study 3; 101; 111; 115; 122), particularly by advancing equity and inclusion (study 37; 54; 105; 123; 124). This theme divides into three key sub-themes, namely the entanglement of personal and professional identities, school principals' axiological philosophy, and the complexities of Whiteness in the context of educational leadership for social justice. As with the previous theme, these sub-themes continue to feed into one another to inform a broader conceptualisation of leadership rooted in histories of identity marginalisation.

### Entanglement of personal and professional identities

Several studies emphasise that school leaders' personal identities—rooted in their race, gender, immigration status, language struggles and cultural diversity—are often inseparable from their professional roles (study 3; 25; 37; 54). According to study 54, identity is not a static characteristic but a dynamic aspect shaped by individuals' lived experiences, social contexts and interactions with systems of power. This intersectionality of identities operates within a complex web of factors that include race, culture, language, social class, gender and personal history, and creates a complex sociocultural dynamic that significantly influences individuals' experiences and approaches as educational leaders. The four Latinx school principals in study 3, for example, faced numerous challenges during their childhood, including racism, systemic oppression and financial hardships. Despite these adversities, they developed strength and resilience that shaped how they navigate challenges, advocate for equity and show commitment to social justice (study 122). 'From recipient to contributor', one principal in a Hong Kong primary school described his childhood experiences as a student in an under-resourced 'rooftop school' and how these experiences planted the seeds of his social justice ethos (p. 116). Returning to his old school as a principal, he leveraged his past to challenge educational inequalities.

Study 25 extends this understanding by showing how Indigenous principals, when responsible for schools serving Indigenous students, draw upon their own cultural identities to promote educational equity. The authors suggest that these principals are uniquely positioned to support their communities by incorporating elements of language, culture and Indigenous ways of learning into the educational environment. This culturally grounded leadership is also seen as allowing Indigenous principals to build stronger, more responsive relationships with their students, teachers and communities. In a contrasting scenario, study 98 provides evidence for the way racial incongruence between school principals and students plays a role in shaping disciplinary experiences, as those who have different racial backgrounds to their students are more likely to implement inequitable disciplinary practices. These disparities persist in schools led by White principals, as Black and Latinx students face higher rates of exclusionary discipline.

In several studies (study 54; 64; 65; 101; 104; 111; 115), gender is placed at the centre of intersectional identities and women principals are reported to navigate and challenge inequitable educational systems. Drawing on personal experiences of marginalisation, these leaders advocate for systemic change. For instance, study 54 highlights how Black women principals, operating in environments where they are marginalised in relation to both race and gender, use their identities to shape their leadership. The study shows how intersectionality enables them to address the unique needs of marginalised students while confronting institutional norms that perpetuate inequity. However, it also reveals the emotional and professional burdens they face as they balance race, gender and leadership responsibilities in often unsupportive environments. Similarly, study 64 explores how Ethiopian women principals, who work in male-dominated contexts, draw on their marginalised identities to promote educational opportunities for underserved students, particularly girls. These leaders use their experiences of oppression to challenge power imbalances within their schools. Across these studies, personal identity—rooted in race and gender marginalisation—emerges as a powerful drive for leadership practices aimed at driving systemic change.

In many of these studies, school principals from marginalised backgrounds use their personal narratives to cultivate an asset-based approach to leadership and reject deficit models that portray marginalised communities in negative terms. Across these studies, one should note that the burden of promoting educational leadership for social justice is often seen as falling disproportionately on non-White principals, who are expected to navigate and challenge predominantly White systems that were not designed to accommodate non-White identities and worldviews.

## School principals' axiological philosophy

The second sub-theme focuses on school leaders' axiological philosophy, which entails the values, beliefs and moral principles underpinning their approach to leadership for social justice and equity. According to study 4, axiology is the philosophical study of values, which explores what principals deem valuable or important, which in turn influences their decision-making and leadership practices. In the context of school leadership, an axiological philosophy forms the foundation for how school principals enact social justice, by guiding their interactions with students, teachers and communities and shaping their responses to systemic inequities. Several studies claim that school principals act based on what they value, and for those who value social justice and equity, these principles become central to their decision-making and leadership practices (study 4; 11; 14; 23; 39; 57; 78). These principals display a commitment to social justice through moral responsibility, as seen in the practices of school principals in disadvantaged contexts in Spain (study 11). Described as driven by a 'realistic utopian' vision, these principals embrace collaborative environments and prioritise both equity and academic excellence (study 11; p. 80).

Several studies show how school principals build on their axiological philosophies in their leadership practices. For instance, participants in study 14 enact caring practices as a form of socially just leadership, also revealing the relational aspect of leadership. Their moral commitment to equity is reflected in their daily interactions with students and staff. This notion of caring as an ethical responsibility further aligns with the moral imperatives highlighted in study 23, where school principals view confronting prejudice and inequity as a moral duty. They believe that it is their ethical obligation to challenge discriminatory practices and create environments that support equity for all students. Their moral convictions shape their responses to challenging situations, just as the principals in study 14 rely on their values to advocate inclusivity. The commitment to social justice is further deepened in study 39, which explores how Black male school principals in the United States use their roles to challenge

systemic racism. These school principals demonstrate moral responsibility toward social justice, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds. Their leadership extends beyond educational duties, as they see themselves as 'protectors and defenders' of their culture and communities (p. 30). Similarly, study 78 emphasises the role of moral leadership in the Vietnamese context, where principals balance autocratic authority with a deep sense of moral responsibility. Their leadership, grounded in Confucian values, ensures that their actions promote harmony within their schools, which further echoes the commitment to social justice seen in principals from other studies.

Together, these studies present a coherent illustration of school principals whose axiological philosophy—rooted in values like fairness, caring and moral responsibility—drives their leadership practices. In each case, the principals' commitment to equity and inclusivity is not only a professional stance but is embedded within complex value systems that shape their decisions and actions, sometimes at the expense of critical awareness and engaging in 'guess work' (study 9; p. 569). However, alongside the importance of this values-driven leadership, the glorification of leaders as 'heroic' figures who can single-handedly solve complex social justice issues often emerges. This perspective overlooks the broader structural constraints and the collective efforts necessary for systemic change. The idealised and utopian image of leadership also risks placing undue pressure on leaders, making them seem solely responsible for rectifying deep-rooted systemic inequities, a notion which is further discussed below.

## The complexities of whiteness in the context of educational leadership for social justice

The third sub-theme explores how Whiteness operates within the context of educational leadership for social justice. According to study 94, Whiteness—as a socially constructed identity—carries inherent privileges and influences White school principals' actions and roles in diverse educational settings. Several studies explore how White principals either confront, perpetuate or challenge their White privilege through their leadership practices (study 25; 55; 62; 76; 94; 103; 105; 115; 123). These studies reveal that Whiteness in leadership presents unique ethical dilemmas, particularly for White principals working in racially diverse or non-White communities, where cultural expectations and systemic barriers can further complicate their equity-driven efforts.

For instance, study 55 focuses on two White female principals in Indigenous schools in Australia and emphasises the ethical complexities they face as racial outsiders. The study shows the tension between their White privilege and the expectations of the Indigenous communities they serve. Each principal is documented as approaching this challenge differently—one adopted a hierarchical leadership style, while the other embraced more culturally responsive practices. The study also reveals that while both principals sought to advocate for equity, the culturally responsive principal was more successful in creating meaningful and sustainable changes aligned with the values and needs of their local community. Similarly, study 123 presents a case study of a White principal leading a high-poverty, racially diverse school. Despite her commitment to social justice, the study highlights her struggles to implement inclusive practices due to structural barriers imposed by the school's racial dynamics. Her experience illustrates the limitations of well-meaning leadership when White privilege is left unexamined and unchallenged. While she sought to create an inclusive environment, her efforts were constrained by the broader racial and socio-economic inequities within the system.

Internal conflicts and resistance are recurring themes across these studies. Study 76 examines the challenges White suburban school principals face when implementing racial



equity reforms in predominantly White communities. In this case, the principal encountered resistance from her White staff, which shows the degree of embedded Whiteness in the school's culture and how difficult it is to dismantle systemic inequities. The study also underscores the internal conflicts White principals experience when they attempt to disrupt the privileges of Whiteness, both within themselves and their communities. This internal struggle, along with external resistance, mirrors the findings in study 94, which explores the cognitive barriers White principals face when addressing race and equity. In this study, White principals often experience fear—of losing status, authority or control—when engaging in conversations about race and equity. This fear can hinder their ability to lead effectively for racial equity, as they may avoid or downplay these critical discussions.

A similar sense of fear is highlighted in study 103, which explores the role of Whiteness in inhibiting educational leadership for social justice. In this study, two White principals struggle to lead discussions about race and racism due to resistance from their predominantly White staff. Their reluctance to fully engage in race-conscious leadership shows how Whiteness can act as a barrier to addressing systemic racial inequities. The authors conclude that the principals' leadership was more reactive than proactive, reflecting the persistent challenges of addressing Whiteness in schools. In contrast, study 62 presents a White principal who actively tried to lead race-conscious conversations through equity-focused teams. Despite her efforts to delegate responsibilities and empower her staff, she still encountered significant challenges rooted in the limitations imposed by Whiteness and deep-seated biases within the school culture. This study highlights how Whiteness can subtly maintain power dynamics that limit the full engagement of equity teams and prevent them from achieving lasting, systemic change.

Together, these studies depict Whiteness as a social construct that needs to be challenged in pursuit of educational leadership for social justice. The complexities of navigating Whiteness—whether through internal conflicts, community resistance or systemic privileges—reveal the tensions between good intentions and the limitations of Whiteness, which will be further discussed as we consider the broader implications for leadership development and systemic change in education.

### Theme 3: Navigating tensions between policy and practice

The role of school principals in navigating the complexities of policy implementation is fraught with tensions between compliance and the pursuit of social justice. Principals are often required to implement and adapt national or district educational policies within their school communities. While some of these policies promote equality, others—particularly those driven by neoliberal accountability systems—can create challenges and barriers for leaders committed to advocating for socially just educational environments. The two sub-themes taken up in this section include policy implementation and local adaptations for social justice (study 1, 26, 49, 56, 87, 119, 125) and navigating neoliberal accountability systems (study 12; 20; 86; 96).

#### Policy implementation and local adaptations for social justice

School principals frequently act as policy intermediaries, tasked with interpreting and adapting educational policies in their communities. Several studies explain that effective leaders make strategic local adaptations when implementing policies, particularly in diverse or under-resourced school environments (study 52; 125). For many principals, the tension



between policy mandates and social justice goals requires a flexible approach to ensure that all students, particularly the marginalised, receive equitable opportunities for success (study 10, 14, 48, 79, 102, 121). Several studies highlight how school principals tailor policies in ways that foster equity and inclusion, while demonstrating their ability to navigate policy constraints and address the often-complex needs of their students (study 13, 26, 49, 56, 87, 119, 125).

First, school principals play a role in adapting national or district policies to meet the unique needs of marginalised students, rather than adhering to strict compliance with standardised mandates. In studies 10 and 56, school principals in Texas are depicted as leveraging their local autonomy to adapt reclassification policies for English learners. While some school principals focused on the procedural aspects of policy compliance, others prioritised the needs of their individual students during the reclassification process. Those who took the latter approach created more equitable opportunities for historically marginalised students by interpreting the policy in ways that expanded educational access and ensured continued support for English learners even after they met the formal criteria for reclassification. Similarly, study 49 examines how Swedish school principals navigated policies for newly arrived migrant students following the 2016 legislation that mandated targeted learning support. This study maintains that among the challenges encountered by these principals, a lack of intercultural and bilingual competencies among staff is evident. However, it further shows how those principals who adapted national guidelines—by providing targeted professional development and implementing new instructional models to support migrant students—can promote inclusion and reduce barriers when national frameworks are insufficient. Likewise, study 26 in Scotland highlights how school principals adjusted the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The authors contend that while CfE promoted equity at a national level, its implementation often clashed with the competitive nature of the education system, especially in terms of performance and accountability measures. In this study, school principals who adapted the curriculum to fit their local contexts were more successful in addressing systemic inequities, reinforcing the notion that flexible, context-driven approaches are key to promoting social justice in education.

Second, navigating political risks and resistance is a real challenge for school principals committed to social justice. Principals who go beyond policy mandates to support disadvantaged students often encounter ‘push back’ from various stakeholders, such as parents, staff and even local authorities, who may not be fully aligned with equity-driven practices (study 35; p. 179). In study 48, Ontario school principals reported feeling unprepared to confront the resistance they face from staff and parents when attempting to implement diversity initiatives. Many struggled to address the deep-seated biases within their school communities, which hindered efforts to create more inclusive environments. This lack of preparation and support left principals vulnerable to backlash when trying to challenge systemic inequities. Study 13 highlights similar political challenges in a junior high school in Taiwan, where the principal faced resistance while advocating for socially just practices. The school, located in a highly polarised socio-economic community, aimed to protect the dignity of economically disadvantaged students by offering discreet financial support. However, the principal is reported to navigate disputes between various stakeholders who had conflicting interests regarding resource distribution and support for marginalised students. Similarly, in study 121, school principals in Costa Rica and England grapple with the socio-political contexts of their schools. In Costa Rica, the principal faced pressure from local families resisting the enrolment of students from other regions, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds. This resistance stemmed from concerns over maintaining community identity and fear of negative influences. In England, the principal navigated the complexities of leading a school serving a predominantly White, economically disadvantaged population. Here, the principal's efforts to promote inclusion were met with resistance tied to entrenched societal

inequalities and the challenges of improving outcomes for marginalised students. Both principals had to carefully balance their social justice work with the need to manage community and stakeholder expectations.

Third, creative, context-sensitive solutions are needed for inclusive policy implementation, particularly when school principals face challenges such as resource constraints, societal pressures and inadequate staff preparedness. While the previous studies reveal some innovative ways for navigating policy mandates (study 10, 26, 49), study 87 presents a counterexample of principals struggling to navigate policy implementation. Located in rural and regional Australia, these principals grappled with conflating various policy mandates, such as inclusion, special education needs and behaviour management. This conflation led to fragmented understandings of inclusion, as principals developed coping mechanisms to manage the overwhelming number of policies rather than actively implementing inclusive practices. As a result, they tended to focus on compliance, often treating inclusion as an administrative task, which led to superficial or incomplete efforts to create genuinely inclusive environments. Similarly, in study 48, Ontario school principals encountered difficulties due to lack of adequate resources and preparation to cater for the diversity of their schools. The study reveals that principals struggled with the demands of equity work in an increasingly diverse context, often without the adequate training to implement inclusive practices effectively and leading to superficial applications of these initiatives.

School principals are considered arbiters in the process of translating policy into practice, particularly in promoting social justice and equity within their schools. Their ability to make local adaptations, navigate political risks and develop creative solutions ensures that policies designed to promote social justice are implemented effectively. Accordingly, educational leadership for social justice seems to require the ability to interpret and adapt policy mandates in ways that serve the school community beyond simple compliance.

## Navigating neoliberal accountability systems

Another significant theme in the literature is the tension school principals face between educational leadership for social justice and the demands of neoliberal accountability systems. Several studies indicate that these systems, which prioritise data-driven performance metrics, often conflict with equity-oriented leadership practices. For example, principals in Australia described navigating a paradox between excellence and equity, where the performative pressures of standardised testing, such as NAPLAN (National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy), created barriers to addressing the needs of marginalised students (study 96). The study illustrates this tension clearly, as a principal of a low SES school in Victoria, Australia faced significant pressure to prioritise academic performance, which sometimes led to the under-resourcing of equity initiatives designed to support marginalised students. The study emphasises the constant strategic calculations school principals must make in weighing equity efforts against performative expectations.

Additionally, neoliberal accountability frameworks often push school leaders to adopt market-driven approaches to education, which focus on outcomes that benefit the school's reputation rather than the holistic needs of the student body. Accordingly, neoliberal discourses can shape school leadership practices in ways that undermine equity and social justice by marginalising the very students these programmes are designed to serve. In a study of dual language programmes (study 86), for instance, principals drew on neoliberal discourses that frame these programmes as tools for giving students a competitive edge in the global job market. This view led some principals to prioritise the economic advantages of bilingualism for their students, sometimes at the expense of promoting inclusion for marginalised groups such as English Language Learners (ELLs). Principals who adopted this

neoliberal lens were less likely to advocate for the inclusion of ELLs, which reflected a narrow focus on individual gains rather than broader social justice goals.

While many school leaders face the challenge of navigating neoliberal accountability systems, some actively resist these pressures and find ways to maintain a focus on social justice. Study 20, for instance, explores how principals in England resisted neoliberal education reforms by engaging in everyday and overt forms of resistance. These principals employed strategies such as selective compliance and symbolic implementation to overcome conflicting pressures and prioritise social justice goals, while appearing to comply with performative expectations. Their actions, framed as 'semblance of compliance,' including the examples of game playing, selectivity, masquerade and reinvention, illustrate how principals can push back against neoliberal reforms without directly confronting the policies (p. 41). For instance, principals often faced the pressure of performance tables but resisted by adapting school practices to prioritise equity and masking their opposition with a pragmatic facade of compliance.

The impact of political contexts on educational leadership becomes evident when comparing how principals in high-stakes and low-stakes environments navigate the tension between accountability and social justice. Study 12, for instance, contrasts the experiences of principals in the San Francisco Bay Area, a high-stakes testing environment, with those in Norway, a low-stakes context. In San Francisco, principals found themselves constrained by accountability pressures that placed a premium on standardised test performance and made it difficult to prioritise inclusivity. They reported that the demands of high-stakes testing limited their ability to foster a socially just environment, as the focus on performance metrics overshadowed broader goals of equity. Conversely, principals in Norway, where the accountability pressures were less pronounced, had more freedom to implement democratic and equity-focused leadership practices without the constant pressure of performance evaluations. The importance of context is highlighted in this study, as it shapes principals' understanding of democracy and social justice and their ability to act on those values.

These acts of resistance, creativity and adaptation show the complex balancing act required of school principals who are committed to social justice while having to operate within neoliberal frameworks that prioritise measurable academic outcomes over inclusive, equitable practices. The tension between accountability pressures and equity goals forces principals to constantly adapt, sometimes employ covert strategies to resist neoliberal reforms, while at other times find creative ways to align their equity initiatives with performative expectations. In all cases, the difficult reality for school principals requires them to carefully navigate these competing demands, often without adequate support or resources.

## DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review explored key trends and themes in relation to educational leadership for social justice. Synthesising 124 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024, we identified three main themes, namely (1) culturally responsive leadership as a mantra for the type of leadership mostly associated with issues of social justice, accompanied in some instances with other forms of adjectival leaderships, such as the distributed and the transformational, (2) the centrality of school principals' personal and professional identities as a gateway for socially just practices and 'heroic' improvisations to support Othered students, and (3) the tensions between policy mandates and equity goals, necessitating local adaptations and intermediary roles, as well as tensions arising from encounters with neoliberal accountability systems including the requirement to prioritise academic performance over social justice. These themes and their sub-themes were used as a guide for further deliberations and discussions on major limitations and

paradoxes in current research on educational leadership for social justice. Therefore, we address the second research question through a critical appraisal of the analysed literature, simultaneously (re/un)thinking contemporary dominant paradigms, epistemologies and intellectual norms in the extant literature (Bainazarov et al., 2022; Wright, 2022).

With reference to the first theme, the articles in this review positioned CRL as a dominant framework for social justice that is tied to critical race theory, cultural awareness and collaborative practices. Given its prominence, we turn our attention to explore the role of culture in educational leadership for social justice as a way to problematise its conceptualisation within this paradigm. As demonstrated above, CRL is identified as an essential backdrop of educational leadership for social justice. That said, it is important to problematise how culture is conceptualised within this paradigm. This problematisation is two-fold. First, culturally oriented educational leadership requires expansive conceptualisations of culture and the role of culture in creating educational ecosystems that advance collective thriving, community-building and becoming in pursuit of social justice. Such conceptualisations necessitate an ontological shift that perceives of culture as a verb (Badwan, 2021; Holliday, 2011; Piller, 2017), rather than a noun constructed around rigid national groupings. The doing of culture in this ontological category becomes entangled with understanding the role of culture and the hierarchy of cultural capital in relation to nationality, gender, social class, ethnicity, religion and other intersecting socio-cultural factors. Culture, within such ontological framing, is seen as something fluid, done by people and done to people (Piller, 2017). Culture is also seen as integral to individuals' identities, worldviews and ways of existing in the world, and therefore, it requires more than representation or responsiveness. Rather, it requires to be sustained, nurtured and acknowledged as a cornerstone for creating conditions that are inclusive and merciful for all students (Alim & Paris, 2017). Based on this critical appraisal of the role of culture in educational leadership and positing implications for leadership preparation providers, we call for a paradigm shift; from culturally responsive to culturally sustaining leadership (CSL). As explained earlier, the latter differs conceptually from the former in the way that culture is placed at the heart of educational leadership for social justice, not as a construct to respond to, but as a construct to sustain with care, while taking education from transmission of knowledge and skills into attention to identities, worldviews and becomings (Ingold, 2017). Such notions of CSL require preparation programmes that promote critical consciousness among principals in ways that equip them with the knowledge and understanding necessary to sustain dynamic cultural ecosystems through reflective practice and equity-informed development opportunities (Furman, 2012).

Second, the ontological complexification of culture enables educational leadership to become better equipped and suitably attuned to account for the intersectionality of disadvantage and therefore the complexity of students' identities and community needs. An intersectional lens allows school leaders to see beyond individual categories such as language, race, gender, religion, ethnicity and social class, and enables analyses that attend to the 'intersecting sites of disadvantage' (Malleon, 2018) that affect Othered students differentially and relationally. While many of the studies in this review suggest ways for the realisation of CSL, such as the acknowledgement of different cultures, often determined based on demographic factors and the representation of different cultures, linguistic diversity, community wealth of knowledge and collaborations with community leaders, more attention is needed to the doing of culture by the different educational stakeholders, including how this doing is enabled, facilitated or inhibited by educational systems, processes and policies. Dominant discourses around other cultures, community languages and community funds of knowledge, which typically use terms such as 'assets' and 'resources,' need to be challenged to resist the commodification of identities and heritage. Likewise, attention needs to be made to how other languages and worldviews are often co-opted by the education system as tools that are used to gradually introduce students to White Eurocentric linguistic

and cultural capital, with the aim of replacing, rather than adding to students' knowledge of other languages and cultures. These insights are inspired from Conteh's (2015) warning against using transitional bilingualism, instead of additive bilingualism. While her critique is mainly concerned with language education, we expand it to include community cultures and Indigenous worldviews. This discussion reinforces the role of language, culture and community worldviews in pursuing epistemic justice in education and ensures the flow of knowledge systems from multiple directions, resisting the epistemic hegemony of state-focused approaches to literacy and cultural capital.

Moving to the second theme, the reviewed studies highlight how school principals' personal and professional identities, which are often rooted in their own histories of marginalisation, shape their leadership practices. However, this emphasis on individual principals prompts a critical examination of its limitations within broader systemic contexts. We note the contested educational leadership approach that mainly relies on those at the top of the school hierarchy. Often such individuals (i.e., school principals) take it upon themselves to leverage their personal and professional experiences to challenge deep-rooted systemic barriers and to advocate for more inclusive educational practices. The literature reveals two limitations in this regard. First, national commitments toward social justice are mainly concerned with the issue of access (Janks, 2004) to the dominant language and the dominant culture. There seems to be a global relevance to this observation as evidenced in this review. This means that other aspects of social justice that require attention to domination, commitment to diversity beyond tokenism and design in the direction of fairer arrangements remain unattended to at national levels and are largely absent from national commitments and educational policy agendas. This places the essential and difficult work on the shoulders of school principals, on top of the differing and conflicting expectations that are already placed on them by the state, the community and other stakeholders. Second, this review indicates a major limitation in this regard by suggesting that this kind of social justice work is often undertaken by those already committed to changing the status quo either due to experiencing injustices themselves or due to critical reflections and motivations driven by their own axiological beliefs, deep critical reflections and racial literacy awareness. Non-White school principals in this review are found to *shoulder the burden* of driving social justice in often aggressive contexts, in comparison to their White counterparts who are required to navigate the complexities of their Whiteness and grapple with internal conflicts, community resistance or systemic privilege. As Niesche (2017) critiques in his discussion of 'zombie leadership,' the reliance on individual principals to enact systemic change reflects a problematic emphasis on heroism and exceptional individualism in educational leadership, as if principals can hold absolute power and full agency. Niesche (2017) continues that this approach often overlooks the relational and distributed nature of power, which Foucault identifies as being exercised across various practices and interactions, rather than being concentrated solely in the hands of those at the top of a given hierarchy. Such leadership arrangements risk setting up principals for failure as they attempt to disrupt entrenched structures of privilege within educational institutions, thus reenacting the status quo (Niesche, 2017). Considering the broader implications for leadership development and systemic change in education, we call for another paradigm shift; from a focus on the individual, prominently featured in Western educational traditions, to the collective and the relational, seen as greater than the sum of individuals (Reisch et al., 2013). This shift urges principal preparation providers to enhance understandings of relational leadership models that dismantle heroic individualism and value collaborative capacities in the face of systemic injustices (Capper et al., 2006).

For the third theme, the articles underscore the persistent tensions that school leaders face between policy mandates and social justice goals, which often requires creative adaptations or resistance to neoliberal accountability systems. These findings require further explorations pertaining to why such tensions persist and how they challenge differing



leadership approaches. Accordingly, principal preparation programmes must address principals' unpreparedness to navigate such resistance through development opportunities in advocacy and conflict management (Miller & Martin, 2015). We take the position that the tensions that educational leaders must navigate do not have neat roadmaps or easy fixes. Rather, they require uneasy rehearsals (Phipps, 2019), practices of system hacking and hospicing (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015) and learning to unthink mastery (Singh, 2018). The vision we advocate for here opens up radical possibilities for educational leadership for social justice and does indeed highlight the limitations that educational leaders have to address if they choose to commit to socially just educational arrangements. This vision embraces vulnerability and discomfort as part of inhabiting norms differently, sitting within the system differently and living that does not 'follow' the norm. Commenting on this, Singh (2018) suggests that educational discomfort can indeed be transformative. This is because education as ethics, argues Singh (2018), is a radically unmasterful act that produces unpredictable and unanticipatable knowledge. It entails unlearning what we already know and interrogating the words and worlds which we come to know, leading the way toward an education that decolonises and liberates. We do, indeed, require a form of scholarship that theorises from the oppressed for the oppressed, as well as from those who advocate for the oppressed, having gone through the path of decolonising the heart (Phipps, 2019) in order to de-create (Weil, 2002) educational practices in pursuit of social justice. We maintain the view that the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility (Hooks, 1994) and it is for this exact reason that the potentialities of education remain boundless.

## CONCLUSION

This review explored diverse contexts, methodologies and findings across various regions, cultures and contexts with a focus on identifying and problematising leadership practices that address social justice for diverse student populations. Our exploration extended beyond post-colonial studies and research from the Global South, recognising that marginalised and Indigenous communities in Western nations face significant educational disparities and social injustices (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Particularly through a social justice lens, this review has emphasised a profound reassessment of the narratives, values and power structures embedded within existing educational systems. This approach to educational justice calls for dismantling Eurocentric models that often dominate leadership practices, and for tolerating pluralistic understandings of knowledge systems that challenge the legacy of colonialism that still pervades schooling worldwide (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2022). In our attempt, we explicitly name existing tensions and generate alternative perspectives that are inherently critical of traditional leadership scholarship by drawing on interdisciplinary ways of knowing, intergenerational and transnational funds of knowledge, relational being and the multiplicities of worldviews (Bainazarov et al., 2022). By challenging and transcending hegemonic paradigms, diverse educations can become catalysts for societal transformation, spaces where ethical self-formation and pluralistic knowledge systems thrive (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2022).

A final reworking of Fraser's (2020) three-dimensional model in light of the results presented in this review shows how (1) educational systems often lack well-resourced schools, resulting in economic injustice standing in the way of redistribution, (2) community representation remains marginal, artificial and tokenistic, standing in the way of meaningful cultural representation and (3) centralised, national and prescribed curricula and pedagogies largely lack inclusivity. The design element prevalent in the reviewed literature is reliant on principals' agency and their willingness to improvise and advocate for socially just arrangements. Such improvisation is usually shouldered by principals whose identity or level of awareness



and recognition pushes them further to try anew and have the lexicon to describe and justify such improvisations in heavily scrutinised environments. We agree with Dei (2019) in that the challenges present in today's educational systems—including racism, cultural and linguistic barriers, power imbalances and social exclusion—require the development and implementation of effective policies and practices that promote social justice and equity. These should not be taken to merely mean diversifying curricula with non-Western perspectives but rather involves a fundamental re-evaluation of the way education is conceived, delivered and valued. According to Battiste (2013), they should aim 'to reconcile contemporary education with the past and with the peoples' present, ensuring that the ideological and self-interests within Eurocentric education are not imposed on [Othered] peoples and they build their own present with their own agency and power' (p. 26). A different future for educational leadership in pursuit of social justice is possible. We offer this review and its analysis as a potential roadmap for reimagining educational futures that are expansive, merciful and socially just for all.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Youmen Chaaban:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Khawla Badwan:** Conceptualization; methodology; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Khalid Arar:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; writing – review and editing.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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APPENDIX A

Author(s)/year	Title	Journal	Context
1. Vassallo (2022)	Leading the flock: Examining the characteristics of multicultural school leaders in their quest for equitable schooling	Improving Schools	Malta
2. Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020)	Equity Leadership Informed by Community Cultural Wealth: Counterstories of Latinx School Administrators	Educational Administration Quarterly	Canada
3. Jayavant (2016)	Mapping the complexities of effective leadership for social justice praxis in urban auckland primary schools	Education Sciences	New Zealand
4. Richard, Salisbury and Cosner (2023)	The school-community connection: social justice leaders' community activism to promote justice for students	International Journal of Leadership in Education	USA

Author(s)/year	Title	Journal	Context
5. Patterson and Wang (2023)	Leading urban school teachers of Black and Brown students during social injustice and the pandemic	School Leadership and Management	USA
6. Brown, McNamara, O'Hara, Hood, Burns and Kurum (2019)	Evaluating the impact of distributed culturally responsive leadership in a disadvantaged rural primary school in Ireland	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Ireland
7. DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020)	Supporting Mexican American Immigrant Students on the Border: A Case Study of Culturally Responsive Leadership in a Dual Language Elementary School	Urban Education	USA
8. Conrad, Lee-Piggott and Brown (2019)	Social Justice Leadership: Principals' Perspectives in Trinidad and Tobago	Research in Educational Administration and Leadership	Trinidad and Tobago
9. Mavrogordato and White (2020)	Leveraging Policy Implementation for Social Justice: How School Leaders Shape Educational Opportunity When Implementing Policy for English Learners	Educational Administration Quarterly	USA
10. Santaella (2022)	Successful school leadership for social justice in Spain	Journal of Educational Administration	Spain
11. Trujillo, Moller, Jensen, Kissell and Larsen (2021)	Images of Educational Leadership: How Principals Make Sense of Democracy and Social Justice in Two Distinct Policy Contexts	Educational Administration Quarterly	USA and Norway
12. Whang (2019)	School leadership for social justice and its linkage with perilous politics	Asia Pacific Education Review	Taiwan
13. Forde, Torrance and Angelle (2021)	Caring practices and social justice leadership: case studies of school principals in Scotland and USA	School Leadership and Management	Scotland and USA
14. Uribe, Vázquez and Arcadia (2020)	School Principal's Leadership for Social Justice in Vulnerable Context: A Case Study on Mexican School Principal	Perspectiva Educational	Mexico
15. Wang (2018)	Social Justice Leadership Theory and Practice: A Case of Ontario	Educational Administration Quarterly	Canada
16. Ham, Kim and Lee (2020)	Which schools are in greater need of culturally responsive leaders? A pedagogical uncertainty management perspective	Multicultural Education Review	South Korea
17. Savvopoulos, Saiti and Arar (2022)	The role of the school head in inclusion and cultural responsive leadership	Journal of Educational Administration and History	Greece
18. Walsh, Keddle, Wilkinson and Howie (2020)	An ecological case-study of the benefits and challenges of socially-just leadership engaging in 'challenging conversations' about social disharmony	Journal of Educational Administration and History	Australia
19. Fuller (2019)	That would be my red line: an analysis of headteachers' resistance of neoliberal education reforms	Educational Review	England

Author(s)/year	Title	Journal	Context
20. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021)	School Leadership Team Competence for Implementing Equity Systems Change: An Exploratory Study	The Urban Review	USA
21. Kamara (2017)	Remote and invisible: the voices of female Indigenous educational leaders in Northern Territory remote community schools in Australia	Journal of Educational Administration and History	Australia
22. Rivera-McCutchen (2014)	The Moral Imperative of Social Justice Leadership: A Critical Component of Effective Practice	The Urban Review	USA
23. Gullo and Beachum (2020)	Principals navigating discipline decisions for social justice: An informed grounded theory study	Heliyon	USA
24. Santamaría and Santamaría (2015)	Counteracting Educational Injustice with Applied Critical Leadership: Culturally Responsive Practices Promoting Sustainable Change	International Journal of Multicultural Education	USA and New Zealand
25. Torrance and Forde (2015)	To what extent can headteachers be held to account in the practice of social justice leadership	Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice	Scotland
26. Cardno, Handjani and Howse (2017)	Leadership Practices and Challenges in Managing Diversity to Achieve Ethnic Inclusion in Two New Zealand Secondary Schools	New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies	New Zealand
27. Lopez and Rugano (2018)	Educational Leadership in Post-Colonial Contexts: What Can We Learn from the Experiences of Three Female Principals in Kenyan Secondary Schools?	Education Sciences	Kenya
28. Awaachia'ookaate' and Chang (2020)	Safe Zones, Dangerous Leadership: Decolonial Leadership in Settler-Colonial School Contexts	Journal of School Leadership	USA
29. Zhang, Goddard and Jakubiec (2018)	Social justice leadership in education: A suggested questionnaire	Research in Educational Administration and Leadership	Canada
30. Shields and Hesbol (2020)	Transformative Leadership Approaches to Inclusion, Equity, and Social Justice	Journal of School Leadership	USA
31. Burgess, Fricker and Weuffen (2023)	Lessons to learn, discourses to change, relationships to build: How Decolonising Race Theory can articulate the interface between school leadership and Aboriginal students' schooling experiences	The Australian Educational Researcher	Australia
32. Damons and Wood (2020)	Transforming traditional views of school leadership for school-community collaboration: a PALAR approach	Action Learning: Research and Practice	South Africa
33. Howard, Gray and Kew (2019)	Creating STEM Momentum: Culturally Relevant Leadership and Hispanic Girls in High School T-STEM Programs in the Southwest Border Region	School Leadership Review	USA (hispanic community)

Author(s)/year	Title	Journal	Context
34. Lopez (2015)	Navigating cultural borders in diverse contexts: building capacity through culturally responsive leadership and critical praxis	Multicultural Education Review	Canada
35. Callahan, Mayer, Johnson and Ochoa (2023)	Exploring Organizational Leadership for English Learner Equity	Leadership and Policy in Schools	USA
36. Thompson,Virella, Goings and Kelly (2023)	Black Women Principals and Expressions of Culturally Responsive School Leadership During Crisis: An Exploratory Study	Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching and Research	USA
37. Scribner, Weingand and Sanzo (2021)	Fostering Cultural Responsiveness in an Urban High School: A Case Study	NASSP Bulletin	USA
38. Smith (2021)	Black Male School Leaders: Protectors and Defenders of Children, Community, Culture, and Village	Journal of School Leadership	USA
39. Lovett and Fluckiger (2014)	The impact and effects of attempts to implement leadership for reading 'both ways': A case study in an Indigenous school	Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice	Australia
40. Kuyurtar and Korumaz (2023)	Culturally Relevant Leadership: Bridging the Equity Gap	Research in Educational Administration and Leadership	Türkiye
41. Ezzani and Brooks (2019)	Culturally Relevant Leadership: Advancing Critical Consciousness in American Muslim Students	Educational Administration Quarterly	USA
42. Vilorio, Byrd, Ferreyro and Lee (2022)	U.S.-Mexico Borderlands Instructional Leadership Reflections	Journal of Borderlands Studies	USA (hispanic community)
43. Brooks and Brooks (2019)	Culturally (ir)relevant school leadership: Ethno-religious conflict and school administration in the Philippines	International Journal of Leadership in Education	Philippines
44. Wanjiru (2021)	School leadership and post-conflict education: How can their roles in developing inclusive practices in post-conflict schooling be understood and conceptualized?	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Kenya
45. Adams and Velarde (2021)	Leadership in a culturally diverse environment: perspectives from international school leaders in Malaysia	Asia Pacific Journal of Education	Malaysia
46. Arar, Örucü and Küçükçayır (2019)	Culturally relevant school leadership for Syrian refugee students in challenging circumstances	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Türkiye
47. Tuters and Portelli (2017)	Ontario school principals and diversity: are they prepared to lead for equity?	International Journal of Educational Management	Canada and USA
48. Norberg (2017)	Educational leadership and im/migration: preparation, practice and policy – the Swedish case	International Journal of Educational Management	Sweden
49. Qian and Walker (2017)	Leading schools with migrant children in Shanghai	International Journal of Educational Management	China



Author(s)/year	Title	Journal	Context
50. Galloway, Ishimaru and Larson (2015)	When Aspirations Exceed Actions: Educational Leaders' Descriptions of Educational Equity	Journal of School Leadership	USA
51. Cruze and López (2020)	Equity and Excellence Among Arizona School Leaders: Encouraging Integration within a Segregative Policy Context	Leadership and Policy in Schools	USA
52. Potter and Chitpin (2021)	Professional development for school leaders in England: decision-making for social justice	Professional Development in Education	England
53. Johnson (2021)	Balancing race, gender, and responsibility: Conversations with four black women in educational leadership in the United States of America	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	USA
54. Niesche and Keddie (2014)	Issues of Indigenous representation: white advocacy and the complexities of ethical leadership	International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education	Australia
55. Mavrogordato and White (2020)	Leveraging Policy Implementation for Social Justice: How School Leaders Shape Educational Opportunity When Implementing Policy for English Learners	Educational Administration Quarterly	USA
56. Jayavant (2016)	Mapping the Complexities of Effective Leadership for Social Justice Praxis in Urban Auckland Primary Schools	Education Sciences	New Zealand
57. Cartagena and Slater (2022)	A District's Journey of Transformative Leadership: Moving Beyond Open Access to the Improvement, Inclusion, and Success of Students of Color in Advanced Placement	Journal of School Leadership	USA
58. Liou and Jgrace (2021)	Toward a Theory of Sympathetic Leadership: Asian American School Administrators' Expectations for Justice and Excellence	Educational Administration Quarterly	USA
59. Flores and Kyere (2021)	Advancing Equity-Based School Leadership: The Importance of Family–School Relationships	Urban Review	USA
60. Kim, Yang and Oh (2024)	Leading from equity: changing and organizing for deeper learning	Journal of Educational Administration	South Korea
61. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020)	Leading Equity Teams: The Role of Formal Leaders in Building Organizational Capacity for Equity	Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk	USA
62. Umpstead, Hacker and Akanwa (2024)	Transformation of school leaders' understandings and practices of change leadership, deeper learning and equity through participation in a leadership academy	Journal of Educational Administration	USA
63. Tekleselassie and Roach (2021)	Leveraging Women's Leadership Talent to Promote a Social Justice Agenda in Ethiopian Schools	Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education	Ethiopia

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64. Martinez, Glover and Ota (2023)	Leadership Journey Testimonios: Four Latina Assistant Principals Enacting Applied Critical Leadership	Journal of School Leadership	USA
65. Virella and Woulfin (2023)	Leading after the storm: New York city principal's deployment of equity-oriented leadership post-Hurricane Maria	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	USA
66. Valdés and Gómez-Hurtado (2023)	Barriers and facilitators for leading the development of inclusive school cultures in Chile	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Chile
67. Da'as (2024)	Indigenous school leadership practices for societal integration in segregated society	Educational Review	Israel (Palestinian Arabs)
68. Küçükakin and Gökmenoğlu (2023)	Rethinking school leadership for equity, diversity and social justice in education: the case of Northern Cyprus	International Journal of Leadership in Education	Cyprus
69. DeMatthews (2016)	Social justice dilemmas: evidence on the successes and shortcomings of three principals trying to make a difference	International Journal of Leadership in Education	USA
70. Buma and du Plessis (2014)	Ethnic Diversity and School Leadership: Lessons from Johannesburg Schools	Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences	South Africa
71. Zachos and Matziouri (2015)	School Leadership and Diversity: Perceptions of Educational Administrators in Greece	International Journal of Education	Greece
72. Santamaría, Santamaría, Webber and Pearson (2014)	Indigenous Urban School Leadership: A Critical Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis of Educational Leaders in New Zealand and the United States	Canadian and International Education	New Zealand and USA
73. Highfield, Webber and Woods (2023)	Culturally responsive leadership in a pandemic context: a case study of three primary schools in a low socio-economic area of New Zealand	International Journal of Leadership in Education	New Zealand
74. Grace (2024)	"Not looking to blame, shame or horrify people": Texas educational leaders reflect on employing anti-racism in everyday school leadership	<a href="#">International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</a>	USA
75. Irby, Drame, Clough and Croom (2019)	"Sometimes Things Get Worse Before They Get Better": A Counter-Narrative of White Suburban School Leadership for Racial Equity	Leadership and Policy in Schools	USA
76. Kondakci, Zayim Kurtay and Kaya Kasikci (2021)	School Leadership For Social Justice In Turkish Urban Setting	Leadership and Policy in Schools	Türkiye
77. Truong and Hallinger (2017)	Exploring cultural context and school leadership: conceptualizing an indigenous model of có uy school leadership in Vietnam	International Journal of Leadership in Education	Vietnam
78. Abawi, Bauman-Buffone, Pineda-Báez and Carter (2018)	The Rhetoric and Reality of Leading the Inclusive School: Socio-Cultural Reflections on Lived Experiences	Education Sciences	Australia, Canada, and Colombia

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79. Rozich and García-Carmona (2020)	Understanding the Relationship between School Leadership for Social Justice and Student Achievement	journal of education human resources	USA
80. Fuentes-Mayorga and Rodríguez-García (2021)	Educational Leadership for Social Justice in Multicultural Contexts: The Case of Melilla, Spain	Leadership and Policy in Schools	Spain
81. Pollock and Briscoe (2020)	School principals' understandings of student difference and diversity and how these understandings influence their work	International Journal of Educational Management	Canada
82. Rissanen (2021)	School principals' diversity ideologies in fostering the inclusion of Muslims in Finnish and Swedish schools	Race Ethnicity and Education	Finland and Sweden
83. Szeto (2021)	How do principals' practices reflect democratic leadership for inclusion in diverse school settings? A Hong Kong case study	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Hong Kong
84. Scheer (2021)	Integrated framework model for the leadership role of principals in inclusive education	European Journal of Education	Germany
85. Bernstein, Katznelson, Amezcua and Alvarado (2020)	Equity/Social Justice, Instrumentalism/Neoliberalism: Dueling Discourses of Dual Language in Principals' Talk About Their Programs	TESOL Quarterly	USA
86. Woodcock and Hardy (2022)	'You're probably going to catch me out here': principals' understandings of inclusion policy in complex times	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Australia
87. Keddle and Holloway (2020)	School autonomy, school accountability and social justice: stories from two Australian school principals	School Leadership and Management	Australia
88. Hughes, Benson, Brody, Murphy and Ranschaert (2022)	A case study: Enacting courage and collaboration in equity and justice-oriented educational leadership	Middle School Journal	USA
89. Rivale-Bell (2022)	Equity Centered Leadership of Principals Who Narrowed the Race-Based Academic Achievement Gap	Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies	USA
90. Robertson, Rhymes and Sessoms-Penny (2023)	The leader-self: Two New Zealand principals respond to social justice issues	International Journal of Leadership in Education	New Zealand
91. Cunningham, Hill and Zhang (2022)	Gender equality and educational leadership in Chinese schools	Power and Education	China
92. Mayger and Provinzano (2022)	Community School Leadership: Identifying Qualities Necessary for Developing and Supporting Equity-Centered Principals	Leadership and Policy in Schools	USA
93. Benson, La Serna and Greenia (2023)	Cognitive barriers to leading for racial equity as a White education leader: a qualitative study	International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education	USA
94. Jantunen, Ahtiainen, Lahtero and Kallioniemi (2022)	Finnish comprehensive school principals' descriptions of diversity in their school communities	International Journal of Leadership in Education	Finland

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95. Dadvand (2023)	Navigating the paradox of excellence and equity in school leadership	Australian Educational Researcher	Australia
96. Vassallo (2024)	The role of the school leader in the inclusion of migrant families and students	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Malta
97. Welsh (2024)	School Leadership, Race, and School Discipline: Examining the Relationship Between School Leader-Student Racial Congruence and the Likelihood of Exclusionary Discipline	Race and Justice	USA
98. Ayanoğlu and Arastaman (2023)	Social Justice Leadership in Education: What Do School Principals Do for Social Justice?	Participatory Educational Research	Türkiye
99. Provinzano and Mayger (2024)	Betwixt and Between Justice and Inaction: Full-Service Community School Principals and Community Equity Literacy	Urban Education	USA
100. Arar (2018)	Arab women's educational leadership and the implementation of social justice in schools	Journal of Educational Administration	Israel (Palestinian Arabs)
101. Molla and Gale (2019)	Positional matters: school leaders engaging with national equity agendas	Journal of Education Policy	Australia
102. Swanson and Welton (2019)	When Good Intentions Only Go So Far: White Principals Leading Discussions About Race	Urban Education	USA
103. Robinson, White and Robinson (2020)	Indigenous women in educational leadership: identifying supportive contexts in Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey	International Journal of Leadership in Education	Canada
104. Ogden (2017)	Becoming an educational leader for social justice: a micro/meso/macro examination of a southern U.S. principal	Research in Educational Administration and Leadership	USA
105. Poon-McBrayer (2017)	School leaders' dilemmas and measures to instigate changes for inclusive education in Hong Kong	Journal of Educational Change	Hong Kong
106. Fessehation and Pai (2019)	Social justice and equity in eritrean schools: Lessons from school principals' experiences	Issues in Educational Research	Eritrea
107. Brooks (2017)	Southern Filipino school leaders and religious diversity: a typology	International Journal of Educational Management	Philippines
108. Sun (2019)	Social justice leadership in urban schools: What do black and Hispanic principals do to promote social justice?	Alberta Journal of Educational Research	USA
109. Edwards(2018)	Feminist approaches to educational leadership in disadvantaged rural communities	Universal Journal of Educational Research	South Africa
110. Slater, Gorosave, Silva, Torres, Romero and Antúnez (2017)	Women becoming social justice leaders with an inclusive view in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain	Research in Educational Administration and Leadership	Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain

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111. Riley and Webster (2016)	Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) building relationships: one school's quest to raise Indigenous learners' literacy	Teaching Education	Australia
112. Gómez-Hurtado, González-Falcón and Coronel (2018)	Perceptions of secondary school principals on management of cultural diversity in Spain. The challenge of educational leadership	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Spain
113. Moss, O'Mara, and McCandless (2017)	School leadership and intercultural understanding: school foyers as situated spaces for doing diversity	International Journal of Inclusive Education	Australia
114. Santamaría, and Jean-Marie (2014)	Cross-cultural dimensions of applied, critical, and transformational leadership: women principals advancing social justice and educational equity	Cambridge Journal of Education	USA
115. Wang (2016)	From redistribution to recognition: How school principals perceive social justice	Leadership and Policy in Schools	Canada
116. Richardson and Sauters (2014)	Social justice in India: Perspectives from school leaders in diverse contexts	Management in Education	India
117. Dematthews (2016)	Competing priorities and challenges: Principal leadership for social justice along the U.S.-Mexico border	Teachers College Record	USA
118. Villavicencio (2019)	Creating and maintaining student diversity: strategies and challenges for school leaders	International Journal of Leadership in Education	USA
119. Wang (2020)	Conceptualizing social justice: Interviews with principals	Journal of Educational Administration	Canada
120. Slater, Potter, Torres and Briceno (2021)	Understanding social justice leadership: An international exploration of the perspectives of two school leaders in Costa Rica and England	Management in Education	Costa Rica and England
121. Szeto (2014)	From recipient to contributor: The story of a social justice leader in a Hong Kong primary school	Management in Education	Hong Kong
122. DeMatthews (2015)	Making Sense of Social Justice Leadership: A Case Study of a Principal's Experiences to Create a More Inclusive School	Leadership and Policy in Schools	USA
123. Gous, Elof and Moen (2014)	How inclusive education is understood by principals of independent schools	International Journal of Inclusive Education	South Africa
124. Arar and Örcü (2022)	Post-migration ecology in educational leadership and policy for social justice: Welcoming refugee students in two distinct national contexts	Educational Management Administration and Leadership	Türkiye and Germany