



FROM EQUITY COMMITMENTS TO TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE: A SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Educational leaders increasingly articulate commitments to equity, inclusion, and social justice, yet those commitments do not necessarily produce equitable institutional conditions. Social justice leadership scholarship has clarified the values, dispositions, and practices associated with equity-oriented leadership, but a persistent problem remains: how do leaders translate equity commitments into sustained organizational practices that produce transformational change? This conceptual article advances a Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework that distinguishes social justice orientation—what leaders believe and value—from social justice leadership praxis—how those commitments become recurring decisions, structures, relationships, resource allocations, instructional priorities, and accountability practices. The framework extends three macro-themes from an earlier phenomenological study of secondary school administrators' experiences of social justice leadership and reframes them as three mutually reinforcing domains: (1) Enacting Visionary and Transformational Leadership, (2) Eliminating Barriers to Equitable Learning, and (3) Promoting Positive School Climate. Synthesizing equity and leadership scholarship, the article develops these domains as an integrated organizational framework. Targeted universalism provides complementary operational logic by connecting a universal aspiration to analysis of differential conditions, targeted strategies, evidence, and recalibration. The framework conceptualizes praxis as reflective, structural, relational, collective, and iterative and proposes that equity becomes meaningful when it is imagined, organized, and lived across institutional life. The article identifies implications for leadership preparation, evaluation, district design, and empirical research. The framework offers leaders and scholars a means of examining not merely whether institutions profess equity, but what they repeatedly do, what they are willing to change, and what those changes make possible for students and communities.

Keywords

Social Justice Leadership, Leadership Praxis, Educational Equity, Targeted Universalism, Transformational Change

Introduction

Educational leaders increasingly operate in environments in which commitments to equity, inclusion, and social justice are expected features of institutional discourse. School mission statements affirm the value of all learners, strategic plans identify equity as an organizational priority, and leaders are routinely called upon to demonstrate responsiveness to diverse student populations. Yet the presence of equity-centered language does not, by itself, establish equitable schooling. A substantial distinction remains between articulating a commitment to social justice and enacting that commitment through the recurring work of leadership. The challenge is therefore not simply whether leaders value equity, but how those values become visible in the decisions, structures, relationships, resource allocations, instructional priorities, and accountability practices that shape students' educational experiences (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

This distinction matters because social justice is not solely an aspirational condition. Bell (2016) conceptualized social justice as both a goal and a process involving equitable participation and resource distribution as well as democratic, participatory, and affirming processes through which people exercise agency and contribute to institutional change. Applied to educational leadership, equity cannot be reduced to a leader's disposition, stated philosophy, or endorsement of diversity. Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano similarly demonstrate that leaders

differ in how they make meaning of social justice and how those understandings shape practice. Beliefs matter, but they are not self-executing. Social justice leadership must be judged not only by what leaders profess, but also by what their leadership repeatedly produces.

The conceptual framework advanced here grows directly from McClain's (2018) phenomenological study of secondary school administrators' social justice leadership praxis. That study yielded three macro-themes: enacting visionary transformational leadership, eliminating barriers for equity of learning, and promoting positive school climate. The present article does not re-report the dissertation findings. Instead, it returns to those empirically generated themes after several years of subsequent scholarship and practice and reframes them as an integrated conceptual architecture for examining how equity commitments become sustained organizational action. In doing so, the article makes explicit a distinction that was implicit in the earlier study: social justice orientation concerns what leaders believe and value, whereas social justice leadership praxis concerns how those commitments are organized, enacted, examined, and sustained across institutional life.

Targeted universalism adds operational logic to this movement from aspiration to action. Rather than equating equity with identical treatment or defining success solely by closing gaps between groups, targeted universalism begins with an explicit universal goal and then examines how differently situated groups are positioned relative to that aspiration (Powell et al., 2019). Leaders investigate the structures that support or impede different groups and develop differentiated strategies capable of moving each toward the shared outcome. For educational leadership, the significance is substantial: a common aspiration such as equitable educational opportunity for every student does not presume that all students encounter the institution from the same position or require identical responses.

This article therefore uses the term social justice leadership praxis to describe the movement from equity-centered commitment to recurring and substantive organizational action. Praxis is more demanding than advocacy, awareness, or aspirational language. It becomes visible in how leaders establish direction, examine patterns of opportunity, allocate resources, shape instruction, develop personnel, distribute influence, engage students and communities, remove barriers, construct organizational expectations, use evidence, and hold themselves and others accountable for equitable conditions. The distinction does not diminish the importance of beliefs or moral commitments; it proposes that those commitments become educationally significant when they generate recognizable patterns of practice and build organizational capacity for sustained change.

The Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework consists of three mutually reinforcing domains: Domain 1, Enacting Visionary and Transformational Leadership; Domain 2, Eliminating Barriers to Equitable Learning; and Domain 3, Promoting Positive School Climate. Vision establishes and mobilizes an equitable aspiration. Barrier removal examines and alters the structures that differentially impede students from attaining that aspiration. Positive school climate asks whether institutional commitments and structural changes are lived through dignity, recognition, voice, participation, safety, support, and belonging. No domain is sufficient by itself: vision without structural change risks remaining rhetorical; structural reform without relational inclusion can leave exclusion intact; and a welcoming climate unsupported by structural equity can mask unequal access, influence, and opportunity.

The framework is conceptual rather than prescriptive. It does not reduce social justice leadership to a universal checklist or assume identical enactment across settings. Institutional histories, resources, populations, community conditions, and experiences of marginalization vary, and meaningful responses must remain sensitive to context and lived experience (Bhowmik et al., 2023; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2019). The sections that follow define social justice leadership praxis, identify the limitations of purely aspirational approaches, develop the three domains and their interdependence, formalize the proposed framework, and consider implications for leadership preparation, evaluation, district design, and future inquiry.

Defining Social Justice Leadership Praxis

The distinction between social justice orientation and social justice leadership praxis requires greater precision because praxis should not be treated as synonymous with action, implementation, or leadership activity more broadly. Educational leaders continually make decisions and act, but action becomes social justice praxis when it is intentionally connected to an equity-centered understanding of educational conditions, informed by critical reflection, directed toward changing inequitable arrangements, and examined in relation to its consequences. Praxis therefore joins interpretation and action rather than privileging either one independently. The question is not simply whether leaders act, but whether they develop the capacity to understand inequity, act upon that understanding, assess what their actions produce, and revise their practice as conditions and evidence warrant.

Bell's (2016) treatment of social justice as both a goal and a process provides an important foundation for this conception. Social justice concerns equitable distribution and participation, but it also concerns the processes through which people exercise agency, participate in decisions, and collaboratively shape institutions. The means through which leaders pursue equitable outcomes are therefore inseparable from the outcomes themselves. Leadership practices that seek equitable results while reproducing exclusionary decision-making, diminishing

community agency, or leaving inequitable structures unexamined remain conceptually incomplete. Social justice leadership praxis requires alignment between the equity leaders seek and the processes through which they obtain it.

The concept of praxis also demands an explicit connection between theory and transformation. Porfilio et al. (2019) argue that articulating a definition of social justice represents only the beginning of equity-centered educational work; the more critical task is putting that definition to work in the practices and structures through which educational programs operate. Weiler and Lomotey (2022) make this relationship even more explicit in their discussion of critical educational praxis. They distinguish deep critical understanding from praxis by emphasizing leaders' capacity to critically examine social arrangements and to alter the organizational policies and practices through which inequity is sustained. From this perspective, theory supplies leaders with ways of interpreting power, opportunity, marginalization, and institutional arrangements, while praxis tests those understandings against organizational life and converts them into purposeful intervention. Praxis is therefore neither theory without enactment nor activity without analysis; it is reflective and theoretically informed action directed toward transformation.

At the organizational level, social justice leadership praxis becomes visible through patterns rather than isolated acts. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) demonstrate the significance of this distinction in their examination of equity-focused school leadership. Their framework identifies leadership practices that include constructing and enacting an equity vision, developing organizational leadership for equity, supervising equitable teaching and learning, allocating resources, hiring and placing personnel, collaborating with families and communities, and fostering equitable school culture. Importantly, they describe organizational routines as recognizable and recurring patterns that structure day-to-day practice. This emphasis on recurrence is central to the present conception of praxis. A single courageous decision may advance equity, but sustained social justice leadership requires equitable ways of working to become increasingly embedded in how an organization interprets data, distributes authority, allocates resources, evaluates practice, and responds to disparities.

Recurrence alone, however, is insufficient. Organizational routines may reproduce inequity as readily as they interrupt it. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) distinguish practices that locate disparities within students and families from those that frame inequity as historically and systemically produced. They further distinguish leadership concentrated in positional authority from collective forms of leadership and inquiry practices that merely examine data from systems of inquiry that use evidence to change policies and practices. These distinctions suggest that social justice leadership praxis has at least three defining characteristics: it frames inequity structurally rather than primarily through individual deficit; it distributes meaningful participation and leadership beyond the formal leader; and it creates ongoing processes of inquiry through which organizational practices are examined and changed. Praxis, in this sense, is both a form of leadership action and a means of building organizational capacity for continued equity-focused action.

Accordingly, social justice leadership praxis is defined here as a reflective, equity-centered, and sustained process through which leaders translate social justice commitments into recurring organizational action; interrogate and alter structures, policies, practices, and relationships that produce inequitable conditions; distribute meaningful participation and agency; use evidence to examine consequences; and continually adapt their leadership in pursuit of equitable educational opportunity and belonging. This definition treats praxis simultaneously as reflective, structural, relational, collective, and iterative. It acknowledges the importance of the leader's values and meaning-making capacities while refusing to locate social justice leadership solely within the individual leader. The relevant unit of analysis extends from what the leader believes to what the organization repeatedly does and makes possible for students.

Limitations of Purely Aspirational Leadership Models

If social justice leadership praxis is understood as the sustained translation of equity-centered commitments into organizational action, then leadership approaches that remain primarily aspirational present an important limitation. Aspiration is indispensable to leadership. Leaders must possess values, establish direction, articulate purposes, and imagine conditions that do not yet exist. Yet neither the presence of a compelling vision nor the possession of admirable dispositions demonstrates that institutional conditions have changed. The central limitation of aspirational leadership is therefore not that vision, values, or moral commitment are unimportant, but that they can remain disconnected from the structures, routines, decisions, and consequences through which educational inequity is either reproduced or interrupted.

Transformational leadership illustrates this tension particularly well. Transformational approaches emphasize the capacity of leaders to inspire followers, cultivate shared purposes, challenge existing practices, and mobilize organizational change. These capabilities make transformational leadership highly relevant to social justice work. However, transformation is not inherently equitable. Sun and Leithwood (2012) note that charismatic and transformational influence may be exercised for collective benefit but can also serve leaders' own interests. Hoch et al. (2018) similarly identify an important limitation in transformational leadership's moral specificity,

noting that transformational behavior does not by itself guarantee ethical leadership and arguing for a more explicit moral dimension. Thus, a leader may be highly effective at inspiring commitment, building consensus, or producing organizational change without necessarily directing those capacities toward social justice.

The inverse problem also warrants attention: action without sufficient equity analysis may produce activity without transformation. Schools can implement programs, interventions, committees, trainings, and new procedures while leaving the institutional arrangements responsible for inequitable outcomes intact. Irby et al. (2020) emphasize that organizational structures are not neutral; they embody assumptions about how schools should operate and can persist precisely because few people question their practicality. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) similarly found that reform efforts may layer programs and interventions onto inequitable educational systems rather than disrupt the structures responsible for unequal access and opportunity. They caution that individual equity-oriented practices, although potentially beneficial, are insufficient when the larger system continues to reproduce inequitable conditions. Weiler and Stanley (2023) extend this argument at the district level, observing that equity reform is frequently piecemeal and that discrete practices are unlikely by themselves to produce broad systems-level change when inequitable policies, practices, structures, and relationships remain intact. Taken together, this literature redirects attention from the quantity of equity-related activities undertaken by an organization toward whether those activities alter the mechanisms through which students experience differential access, opportunity, participation, and outcomes.

The problem, then, is not aspiration itself but aspiration without an adequate mechanism for enactment and accountability. Vision can establish purpose but cannot substitute for structural change. Moral commitment can orient leadership but cannot establish whether institutional consequences are just. Awareness can deepen understanding but cannot substitute for intervention. Programs and initiatives can provide needed support but may remain fragmented if they are not connected to the organizational conditions producing inequity. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) illustrate this distinction empirically: their examination of equity systems change identified clear communication of an equity vision as necessary but insufficient without accountability for implementation, organizational prioritization of the work, ongoing capacity development, and the allocation of time and resources required to sustain it. Equity leadership, in this sense, becomes visible not simply through what leaders endorse but through what they make organizationally possible. Even transformational activity can therefore fail the test of social justice if the transformation does not alter who has access, whose knowledge matters, how resources and opportunities are distributed, whose participation carries influence, and what students experience.

The three domains developed in the sections that follow respond to this challenge. Visionary and transformational leadership provides direction and mobilizes collective purpose; the systematic removal of barriers translates that purpose into structural and organizational change; and a positive school climate attends to the relational conditions of voice, dignity, participation, and belonging through which social justice is experienced. Considered together, the domains provide a means of moving beyond aspiration without relinquishing its importance. Therefore, the first of these domains, visionary and transformational leadership, begins not by rejecting vision, but by examining what is required for an equity-centered vision to become actionable and transformative.

Domain 1: Enacting Visionary and Transformational Leadership

Vision is indispensable to social justice leadership, but vision becomes operative only when it provides direction for collective action and a basis for judging institutional decisions. Educational leadership has long been understood as a process of influence organized around values, purposes, and a desired future for the institution. Daniëls et al. (2019) identify vision as a recurring feature of effective school leadership and note that contemporary leadership extends beyond the formal authority of the principal to influence exercised across the school community. Leithwood et al. (2020) similarly place direction setting at the center of a broader repertoire of successful leadership practices that includes building relationships and developing people, redesigning the organization to support desired practices, and improving the instructional program. This broader evidence base is important for the Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework because it locates vision within a set of practices through which purpose can become organizational capacity rather than remain the private commitment of an individual leader.

From Vision to Collective Purpose

Transformational school leadership likewise emphasizes shared goals, intellectual stimulation, individualized support, collaboration, participation, and culture building (Daniëls et al., 2019). These practices matter because institutional inequities are unlikely to be altered through individual conviction alone. Change requires organizational members who understand the purpose of the work, recognize themselves as participants in it, and possess the capacity and opportunity to contribute to its enactment. Transformational leadership is therefore useful not simply because it inspires people, but because its developmental and collaborative dimensions can help convert vision into distributed institutional capability.

Recent empirical work further supports an integrated understanding of leadership. Constantinou et al. (2025) found a positive association between transformational/transactional leadership and teachers' perceptions of

principal effectiveness. Their findings are instructive because they do not suggest that inspiration should replace management. Vision, inspiration, and innovation were most useful when reinforced by structure, monitoring, and accountability. This combination is especially relevant to Social Justice Leadership Praxis: an equity-centered vision requires imagination and mobilization, but it also requires expectations, responsibilities, organizational supports, and accountability mechanisms capable of sustaining implementation.

Equity as the Content of Vision

For purposes of Social Justice Leadership Praxis, however, the presence of vision is not enough. A material distinction must be made between having a compelling vision and having an equity-centered vision. Transformational leadership can mobilize an organization toward a preferred future, but the social justice significance of that movement depends on the content of the future being pursued. A school can become more efficient, innovative, cohesive, technologically sophisticated, or even more successful by conventional measures without altering inequitable distributions of opportunity, participation, influence, or belonging. The question is therefore not simply whether leaders can inspire change, but what they are asking the institution to become, for whom, and according to whose definition of improvement.

Porfilio et al. (2019) sharpen this distinction by arguing that social justice commitments must be made explicit and operationalized. In their analysis of educational leadership preparation, articulating a definition of social justice is only the beginning; the more demanding task is tracing that definition into the practices, learning experiences, structures, and expectations through which it is enacted. Applied to institutional leadership, the implication is straightforward: a vision of equity must be sufficiently explicit to guide choices and sufficiently operational to permit examination of whether those choices are consistent with the stated commitment. Broad language about serving all students can unite a community, but it can also conceal substantial disagreement about what equity requires and whether existing arrangements should change.

The distinction between transformational and transformative leadership makes the equity content of vision even clearer. Shields and Hesbol (2020) describe transformative leadership as explicitly oriented toward deep and equitable change. It requires leaders to know themselves, their organizations, and their communities; challenge deficit thinking and prejudicial knowledge frameworks; examine and redistribute inequitable power; and connect educational practice to democracy, emancipation, equity, and justice. Their empirical cases also demonstrate that a stated mission to meet the needs of all students is insufficient when deficit assumptions, implicit bias, exclusionary policies, or inequitable curricula remain untouched. The difference in terminology is subtle but conceptually important for this framework: transformational leadership contributes the capacity to mobilize change, whereas transformative leadership helps specify the equity, power, and justice questions that should discipline that mobilization.

This synthesis strengthens the visionary component of Social Justice Leadership Praxis. Visionary leadership is not conceptualized here as an exceptional leader imagining a better institution and persuading others to follow. Rather, it is the disciplined development of a shared equitable aspiration informed by evidence and by the experiences of people situated differently within the institution. The leader retains responsibility for direction and mobilization, but equitable vision construction requires mechanisms through which competing experiences, knowledge, and interests become visible. An equity-centered vision is therefore both directional and participatory: it establishes a clear commitment to improved student conditions while remaining responsive to evidence and lived experience when institutional actions fail to produce equitable consequences.

From Inspiration to Enactment

Research on K–12 equity directors offers an additional organizational test of whether equity commitments have been configured for enactment. Irby et al. (2021) found that the ability of equity directors to influence systemic change varied with the authority and resources attached to their roles, including supervisory power, access to senior decision makers, budgetary discretion, and influence over curriculum, instruction, and professional learning. When districts expected transformative results but positioned equity leaders without meaningful authority or resources, the role could become largely symbolic. Conversely, roles aligned with institutional priorities and supported with authority, resources, and access created greater potential for substantive change. The larger lesson extends beyond equity-director positions: institutions cannot expect equity outcomes from leaders, teams, or initiatives without the organizational capacity to change the conditions producing inequity.

Thus, Domain 1 does not claim that visionary and transformational leadership accomplish structural equity by themselves. Its contribution is to establish direction, make equity purposes explicit, cultivate shared ownership, mobilize people, create readiness for change, and build human and relational capacity for sustained action. Within the targeted universalist framework, this involves articulating a meaningful universal goal while cultivating the organizational willingness to understand why different groups are positioned differently in relation to that goal.. Domain 1 supplies direction and mobilization; the remaining domains give that direction institutional and experiential substance.

The first domain of Social Justice Leadership Praxis therefore positions visionary and transformational leadership as necessary but deliberately incomplete. Vision provides an image of the equitable institution toward which collective effort is directed. Transformational leadership helps mobilize commitment, challenge assumptions, develop people, and sustain movement toward that future. Transformative and inclusive perspectives help ensure that the future is explicitly concerned with power, exclusion, diversity, and justice. Distributed and relational perspectives widen agency and ownership. Organizational improvement research demonstrates that commitments must be embedded in structures, routines, resources, and cycles of inquiry. Yet the social justice test must be substantive rather than merely rhetorical. The key question is whether the institutional conditions that shape students' educational experiences actually change.

Domain 2: Eliminating Barriers to Equitable Learning

If Domain 1 establishes the equitable future toward which an institution seeks to move, Domain 2 asks what stands in the way. Social justice leadership cannot end with inspiring people to pursue equity; it must identify and alter the policies, practices, resource distributions, routines, assumptions, and organizational structures that make equitable learning more difficult for some students than for others. Within the Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework, this domain concerns equity organized: the institutional work through which an equitable aspiration acquires structural substance. Yet the social justice test remains consequential rather than rhetorical: whether the institutional conditions shaping students' educational experiences change.

From Student Deficit to Institutional Inquiry

This orientation changes the questions leaders ask. Instead of beginning with why particular students are failing to adapt to existing arrangements, leaders examine how those arrangements distribute opportunity. Which students have access to advanced coursework, experienced teachers, rigorous curriculum, meaningful support, restorative responses, inclusive special education, extracurricular opportunities, technology, and decision-making influence? Which rules, schedules, referral processes, placement practices, resource patterns, or assumptions repeatedly advantage some groups while constraining others? Such questions do not deny individual agency or variation. They refuse, however, to treat recurring group-based disparities as naturally occurring or educationally neutral.

Structures and Routines as Sites of Equity Praxis

Research on organizational leadership for equity demonstrates that durable change requires more than isolated interventions. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) found that formal leaders can build organizational capacity through routines that normalize an equity framing of disparities, broaden leadership beyond positional authority, engage school communities in dialogue and collective learning, and use equity-focused data for iterative improvement. Their framework is particularly instructive because it connects equity to three interrelated dimensions: how disparities are framed, how leadership is constructed and enacted, and whether inquiry becomes an ongoing organizational practice. At its most developed level, equity work is collective, attentive to power, and sustained through systems of inquiry rather than dependent on the convictions of one leader.

Irby et al. (2020) make a complementary argument by connecting equity leadership with organizational improvement. Their analysis suggests that equity-oriented structures and routines can increase educational access, opportunity, and outcomes when they are built into the fabric of schools. This distinction matters for the present framework. A school may conduct an equity workshop, launch a mentoring program, revise a statement of values, or create an equity committee and still leave untouched the systems through which students are sorted, disciplined, taught, resourced, and heard. Programs can compensate for inequitable systems without changing them. Domain 2 therefore examines whether equity has become a sustained feature of the institution's organizational structures and everyday practices.

From Programs to Systems Change

Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) sharpen this distinction by observing that reform efforts often layer interventions and remediation onto systems whose underlying practices remain inequitable. Their study of school leadership teams engaged in equity systems change shifts attention from adding new initiatives to developing the collective competence required to alter the system itself. The point is not that programs are unimportant; targeted supports may be necessary and beneficial. The concern is whether those supports merely help students survive arrangements that continue to generate unequal access and outcomes. Social justice praxis requires leaders to ask when a barrier should be navigated and when the structure producing the barrier must be redesigned.

Transformative leadership research reinforces this structural test. Shields and Hesbol (2020) describe leaders who moved beyond stated commitments by changing structures, policies, curriculum, pedagogy, disciplinary approaches, and community relationships. Their work underscores that transformation is not established by the visibility or intensity of an initiative, but by what is altered in the institution and what becomes possible as a result. In Domain 2, then, the distinction between transactional and transformative change is practical

as well as theoretical. A transactional response may remove an immediate obstacle, while a transformative response addresses the arrangements that repeatedly recreate the obstacle. Both may have value, but they should not be confused.

Targeted Universalism: From Shared Goals to Differentiated Action

Targeted universalism offers an especially useful operational logic for this domain because it joins a common aspiration to explicit analysis of differential conditions. powell et al. (2019) propose beginning with a universal goal, assessing performance relative to that goal, identifying groups and places situated differently in relation to it, examining the structures that support or impede each group, and developing targeted strategies capable of moving each toward the shared outcome. The logic resists two common errors: assuming that equal treatment is equitable treatment and defining success merely as closing the distance between marginalized groups and a comparatively advantaged group. The universal goal remains the destination for everyone, but the pathways and supports need not be identical.

For Social Justice Leadership Praxis, the significance of targeted universalism lies in where it locates the problem. If a group repeatedly encounters an obstacle, the analytical task is not simply to design a service for that group; it is to understand the structures producing the differential position. powell et al. (2019) distinguish interventions that create a pathway around a barrier from changes that alter the barrier-producing structure itself. This distinction aligns closely with Domain 2. The point of targeting is not to fix groups; it is to change the structures that position groups differently.

Evidence, Continuous Improvement, and Recalibration

Barrier removal must also be treated as an iterative process rather than a one-time correction. Lacroix et al. (2024) describe equity-focused intentional learning communities that establish an explicit equity aim, examine disaggregated evidence, conduct root-cause analysis, identify high-leverage changes, build shared leadership capacity, reorganize systems when necessary, and monitor implementation and outcomes through continuous improvement. Their work offers an important warning: adult learning may be transformational for educators without producing transformed outcomes for students when equity is not the explicit aim and consequences are not examined. Good intentions, professional growth, and implementation fidelity are insufficient evidence that a barrier has been removed.

This insight places evidence at the center of praxis without reducing equity to a narrow accountability exercise. Data should help leaders notice patterns, test explanations, examine institutional conditions, and determine whether changes are moving differently situated students toward the shared aspiration. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) caution that inquiry itself can reproduce deficit thinking when outcome disparities are framed as problems residing in students rather than as signals of systemic, structural, and historically embedded conditions. The question is therefore not simply whether leaders use data, but how they interpret it, whose knowledge is included in making sense of it, what actions follow, and whether those actions alter students' opportunities and experiences. Recalibration is not evidence that the framework failed; recalibration is part of the framework.

From Structural Equity to Lived Experience

Domain 2 positions the removal of barriers as a disciplined form of organizational praxis. Leaders identify patterns of inequity, interrogate the structures and routines contributing to those patterns, mobilize authority and resources, implement changes responsive to differently situated groups, examine consequences, and revise when the desired conditions do not emerge. This work shifts social justice leadership from the language of opportunity to the organization of opportunity. Domain 1 asks what equitable future the institution is trying to create. Domain 2 asks what the institution must be willing to change to make that future attainable.

Yet structural change remains deliberately incomplete within the Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework. A school may revise policies, redistribute resources, redesign schedules, expand access, or alter disciplinary and instructional systems while students and families continue to experience distrust, cultural marginalization, diminished voice, or exclusion from meaningful participation. Structural equity must therefore be examined through the relational and experiential conditions it produces. The framework consequently moves from equity organized to equity lived: the positive school climate through which institutional commitments and structural changes become recognizable in people's everyday experience.

Domain 3: Promoting Positive School Climate

The third domain of Social Justice Leadership Praxis concerns the relational and experiential conditions through which students, educators, families, and communities encounter the institution. If visionary and transformational leadership establishes the equitable future toward which a school seeks to move, and barrier removal addresses the structural conditions that make that future more difficult for some students to attain, positive school climate asks a different but equally important question: What does participation in the institution actually feel like and make

possible for the people who experience it? A school may adopt inclusive policies, redistribute resources, revise disciplinary procedures, and articulate commitments to equity while students and families continue to experience invisibility, diminished expectations, exclusion from decision making, cultural marginalization, or distrust. Social justice leadership therefore cannot be evaluated solely through the formal structures leaders change. It must also be examined through the relational conditions those structures produce.

This conception is consistent with Bell's (2016) understanding of social justice as both a goal and a process. The goal involves equitable participation, while the process must itself be democratic, participatory, respectful of human diversity, affirming of human agency, and collaborative. Bell further argues that justice requires not only an equitable distribution of resources but recognition, respect, safety, and meaningful participation in shaping the institutions and processes that affect people's lives. From this perspective, school climate is fundamental to advancing social justice. The ways people are regarded, heard, engaged, protected, challenged, and invited to exercise agency constitute part of the justice of the institution itself.

From Positive Climate to Equity-Centered Climate

The language of positive school climate can become conceptually thin when positivity is defined primarily through order, satisfaction, friendliness, or the absence of visible conflict. A school may be orderly without being inclusive, welcoming without being equitable, and cohesive while some groups remain excluded from influence or opportunity. For Social Justice Leadership Praxis, positive climate therefore requires an explicitly equity-centered interpretation: whether people situated differently within the institution experience recognition, participation, dignity, support, and belonging. Bhowmik et al. (2023) strengthen this interpretation through a diversity and intersectionality lens, emphasizing that identities and forms of marginalization interact and may shape students' institutional experiences differently. School climate is thus both relational and organizational, shaped by everyday relationships as well as expectations, disciplinary decisions, representation, access, communication, and decision-making routines.

Recognition, Safety, Belonging, and High Expectations

An equity-centered climate begins with recognition. Bell (2016) explicitly joins distributive justice to recognition and respect, arguing that full inclusion requires not only access to resources but participation and the capacity to shape institutions and processes. Recognition in this sense is more substantive than interpersonal courtesy. It concerns whether people encounter the institution as persons whose identities, knowledge, experiences, and aspirations are legitimate and crucial.

Likewise, belonging must be understood as more than comfort. Within this framework, belonging refers to an institutional condition in which people can participate without being required to suppress significant aspects of themselves to be regarded as legitimate members of the community. It is visible when students experience their identities as neither liabilities nor exceptions; when they believe adults will listen to them; when they encounter cultural responsiveness rather than deficit interpretation; and when they experience themselves as participants in, rather than simply recipients of, schooling. Bhowmik et al.'s (2023) insistence that inclusive cultures value, respect, and hear students across differences supports this more demanding conception.

Voice, Participation, and the Distribution of Relational Power

If recognition establishes that individuals and communities matter, voice concerns whether their knowledge can influence institutional understanding and action. Bell's (2016) distinction between "power with" and "power over" is particularly relevant here. A social justice process is not fully participatory when leaders retain all operational authority while inviting others merely to react to decisions already made. Participation becomes meaningful when those affected by institutional arrangements possess genuine opportunities to contribute knowledge, shape interpretation, and influence action.

This distinction is central to Domain 3. Voice without influence can become another form of symbolic inclusion. Schools may conduct listening sessions, administer climate surveys, invite parents to meetings, convene student groups, or celebrate community diversity without allowing what they learn to alter institutional decisions. Social Justice Leadership Praxis requires a stronger relationship between listening and action. Leaders must create mechanisms through which knowledge generated by students, staff, families, and communities can enter organizational sensemaking, decision making, and accountability.

Relational Trust and the Capacity for Courageous Dialogue

Positive school climate is often associated with harmony, but equity-centered leadership requires a more complex understanding. Work involving race, disability, language, culture, gender, class, sexuality, immigration, or other dimensions of inequity frequently surfaces differences in interpretation, competing interests, institutional histories, and deeply held beliefs. A school that defines positivity as the absence of tension may inadvertently discourage the very conversations needed to identify exclusion.

A socially just climate therefore is not one in which people never experience discomfort. It is one in which difficult issues can be examined without making humiliation, retaliation, dismissal, or silencing the price of participation. This distinction is particularly significant for members of nondominant groups, who may otherwise bear disproportionate responsibility for raising inequities while also assuming disproportionate interpersonal risk for doing so. The leader's responsibility includes establishing norms and practices through which disagreement can remain substantive without becoming demeaning and through which institutional learning does not depend solely upon the courage of individuals who are most affected by inequity.

From Interpersonal Goodwill to Organizational Routines

One of the most important distinctions for Social Justice Leadership Praxis is the difference between a leader who creates positive relationships personally and an organization capable of sustaining relationally equitable practice. Individual warmth, accessibility, empathy, or trustworthiness can matter greatly, but a positive climate that depends primarily on a particular leader's personality remains fragile. Praxis requires institutionalization.

Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) are especially useful here because they examine the role of organizational routines. Their equity teams engaged in repeated patterns of professional learning, dialogue, data inquiry, and collective leadership intended to help members recognize disparities, develop equitable responses, and sustain improvement over time. The authors explicitly caution that formal structures such as equity teams—and even a leader's equity vision—are insufficient on their own. What matters is how those structures are used to develop organizational capacity and recurring collective practice.

This is the point at which climate becomes praxis rather than sentiment. A leader may genuinely care about students and communities yet preside over routines that repeatedly produce exclusion. Conversely, equitable routines can help make inclusive relationships less dependent upon individual goodwill. The social justice task is therefore to align interpersonal commitments with organizational arrangements so that recognition, participation, and dignity become dependable features of institutional life.

Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Climate

An equity-centered conception of school climate must also resist race-neutral or difference-neutral formulations of inclusion. Bhowmik et al. (2023) explicitly identify an anti-racist stance as part of inclusive leadership. They describe leaders who educate themselves and others about overt and subtle forms of racism, including stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, microaggressions, and implicit bias, while deliberately fostering more positive racial relations. Their intersectional approach simultaneously cautions against reducing inclusion to race alone; leaders must attend to the ways multiple dimensions of identity and marginalization interact.

Shields and Hesbol (2020) reinforce this proposition through their attention to deficit assumptions and implicit bias. Their findings suggest that mission statements promising to meet the needs of all students are insufficient when underlying mindsets continue to position some students through deficit assumptions. They call for explicit and ongoing conversations as well as changes to structures, policies, curriculum, pedagogy, and culture. In other words, a positive climate is not created by avoiding conversations about racism or inequity in the interest of preserving harmony. Silence may protect organizational comfort while leaving exclusion undisturbed.

Within Social Justice Leadership Praxis, inclusive climate consequently requires leaders to address both interpersonal incidents and the patterned conditions that make such incidents more or less likely. The aim is not simply to respond effectively after a student experiences bias but to develop organizational capacity for recognizing how assumptions, norms, policies, and practices shape the everyday experiences of different groups. In this respect, Domain 3 and Domain 2 necessarily overlap: experiences of exclusion may reveal structural barriers, while structural reform should alter the quality of students' lived experiences.

Targeted Universalism and Differential Experiences of Climate

Targeted universalism provides a particularly useful operational logic for Domain 3 because it prevents positive school climate from being reduced to a single average condition presumed to be experienced equally by everyone. The universal aspiration can be stated clearly: every student should experience an educational environment characterized by dignity, safety, recognition, belonging, meaningful voice, high expectations, and the support necessary to thrive. Yet a universal goal does not imply that all students are situated similarly relative to that goal or that the same intervention will move everyone toward it.

A targeted universalist approach requires leaders to examine those differences rather than assume them away. As established earlier in the article, the shared aspiration remains universal, while leaders investigate how groups are situated relative to that aspiration and select strategies responsive to the barriers and conditions affecting them (powell et al., 2019). Applied to school climate, this means that evidence should be interpreted not only in aggregate but in ways that allow leaders to notice differential patterns of safety, trust, belonging, discipline, participation, representation, and voice.

The resulting strategies may be differentiated while remaining oriented toward the same universal goal. Some communities may need stronger language access; others may need changes to disciplinary practices, more

representative personnel, culturally responsive curricula, safer mechanisms for reporting bias, stronger student organizations, redesigned family engagement, or new forms of participation in institutional decision making. Targeted universalism therefore complements Domain 3 by asking leaders to judge climate not by whether a school can describe itself as welcoming but by whether different groups are moving toward the shared conditions of full membership and participation.

Making Positive School Climate Observable as Praxis

The third domain strengthens the distinction between social justice as orientation and social justice as leadership praxis. Leaders frequently express commitments to caring relationships, inclusive community, student voice, and belonging. Those commitments matter, but the framework asks how they become visible in recurring institutional practice.

A leader enacting Domain 3 would be expected to establish conditions in which students and families can speak and be taken seriously; create routines for examining how climate is experienced across groups; develop adults' capacity to recognize bias and deficit assumptions; cultivate culturally responsive and anti-racist practice; protect physical and psychological safety; maintain high expectations alongside meaningful support; create opportunities for collaborative and distributed leadership; engage communities reciprocally; support difficult dialogue; and use evidence to revise practices when intended conditions are not being experienced equitably. These are not isolated activities. Together, they represent an organizational pattern through which dignity, recognition, participation, and belonging become increasingly dependable rather than accidental.

The ultimate criterion is consequential. A positive climate should be evident not only in what leaders say about the institution, nor only in whether members report cordial relationships, but in whether people—particularly those historically positioned at the margins—experience the school as a place in which they are recognized, respected, heard, supported, challenged, and able to participate meaningfully. A school's claim to inclusion becomes credible when those who have had the greatest reason to question their belonging can experience evidence of it in the institution's daily life.

Interdependence Among the Three Domains

The three domains of Social Justice Leadership Praxis are analytically distinct but operationally interdependent. Visionary and transformational leadership establishes and mobilizes an equitable aspiration; the systematic removal of barriers addresses the organizational conditions that differentially constrain students' opportunities to attain that aspiration; and a positive school climate attends to whether institutional commitments and structural changes are experienced through relationships and practices characterized by dignity, recognition, voice, participation, safety, support, and belonging. The significance of the framework, however, does not reside simply in placing these dimensions alongside one another. Social justice leadership becomes praxis through their interaction. Each domain supplies something the others cannot, and each exposes limitations that can emerge when the others operate in isolation.

The limitations of separation are evident across the three domains. An equity-centered vision can establish purpose and mobilize collective effort while leaving intact the policies, routines, resource distributions, and decision-making structures that prevent some students from reaching that vision. Conversely, structural reforms may alter formal conditions without ensuring that students and communities experience recognition, trust, participation, and belonging within the revised arrangements. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) caution that beneficial equity practices may leave inequitable systems largely undisturbed when they are layered onto structures that continue to reproduce unequal opportunity, while Irby et al. (2020) connect equity leadership to the organizational routines through which access and opportunity are sustained over time. Structural change therefore matters not because changing structures is intrinsically transformative, but because those changes must advance an explicit equity purpose and alter the conditions students encounter.

The relationships among the domains are mutually reinforcing rather than simply cumulative. Students' and families' experiences may expose barriers that formal achievement or participation data fail to identify; structural changes may produce consequences that leaders did not anticipate; and persistent contradictions between institutional commitments and lived experience may require reconsideration of both strategy and vision. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) distinguish episodic attention to equity data from systems of inquiry that use evidence to change organizational policies and practices. Lacroix et al. (2024) likewise connect explicit equity aims to examining inequities, reorganizing systems, monitoring implementation, and adapting practice through continuous improvement. Their caution that learning may be transformative for educators without necessarily becoming transformative for students reinforces a central principle of the framework: the effectiveness of equity work must be examined in relation to what changes in students' opportunities and experiences.

The three domains therefore converge on a single proposition: equity commitments become transformational only when they alter institutional direction, institutional conditions, and institutional experience. Vision identifies the future the institution claims to seek. Barrier removal changes the arrangements that shape who can reach it. Positive and inclusive school climate reveals whether people can recognize and participate in that

future through the relationships, opportunities, routines, expectations, and sense of membership they encounter in the present. Put differently, vision without structural enactment remains aspiration; structural change without relational justice remains incomplete; and belonging that depends upon inequitable structures remains precarious. Social Justice Leadership Praxis requires all three because equity must be imagined, organized, and lived.

The interdependence developed here establishes the conceptual foundation for the framework that follows. The next section formalizes these reciprocal relationships in the proposed Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework and explains how targeted universalism provides an operational logic for moving from a shared equity aspiration to differentiated action, ongoing assessment, and transformational change.

Proposed Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework

The interdependence established in the preceding section provides the conceptual foundation for the Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework. If equity must be simultaneously imagined, organized, and lived, then social justice leadership cannot be adequately represented by a single leadership style, individual disposition, programmatic intervention, or isolated organizational practice. Its defining feature is instead the sustained translation of equity-centered commitments into recurring organizational action across multiple dimensions of institutional life. This distinction addresses a persistent challenge in social justice scholarship: defining and affirming social justice is necessary, but the more pertinent task is operationalizing those commitments through the structures, practices, relationships, and decisions of educational institutions (Porfilio et al., 2019). Similarly, Weiler and Lomotey (2022) distinguish critical understanding from critical praxis by emphasizing action capable of examining and changing the organizational policies and practices through which inequity is sustained. The framework advanced here therefore shifts attention from whether leaders possess a social justice orientation to how that orientation becomes recognizable as sustained organizational praxis.

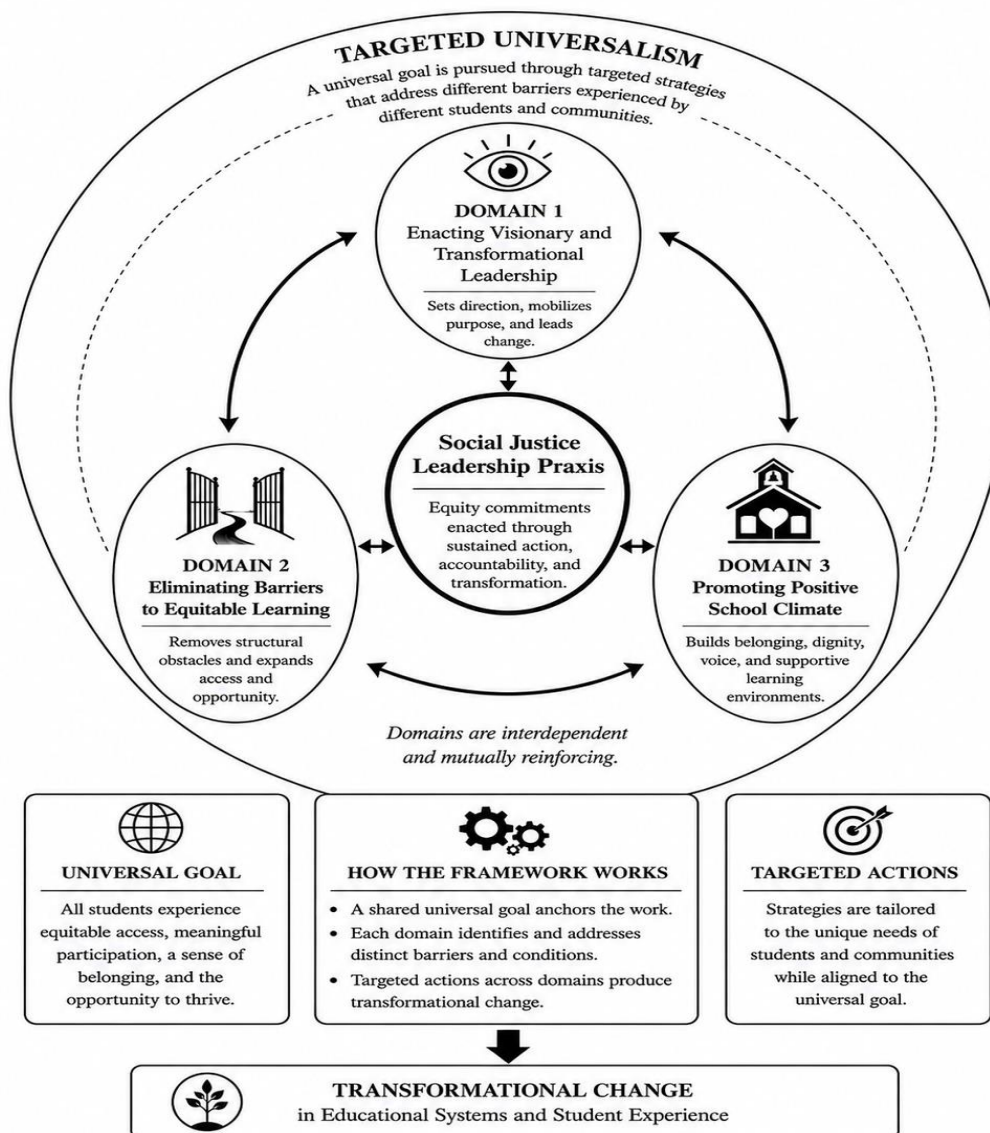


Figure 1. Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework

Note. The three domains are mutually reinforcing. Targeted universalism provides the operational logic connecting a shared universal goal to differentiated action, evidence, recalibration, and transformational change.

Figure 1 presents the Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework, illustrating how the three domains operate as an interdependent and mutually reinforcing system and how targeted universalism connects a shared universal goal to differentiated action, ongoing inquiry, evidence-informed recalibration, and transformational change. The framework is conceptual rather than prescriptive. It does not propose a fixed sequence of leadership behaviors or suggest that social justice leadership should be enacted identically across schools and communities. Instead, it identifies three interacting domains within which equity-centered leadership becomes actionable and incorporates targeted universalism as a complementary operational logic for moving from shared aspiration to contextually responsive action.

The placement of Social Justice Leadership Praxis at the center of the framework is intentional. The central construct is not the principal, superintendent, equity director, or another formally designated leader. Nor is it transformational leadership, transformative leadership, inclusive leadership, or any other singular leadership theory. These perspectives contribute important capacities and understandings, but the proposed framework is concerned with what equity commitments cause educational organizations to repeatedly do.

Three Domains: Equity Imagined, Organized, and Lived

The three domains surrounding Social Justice Leadership Praxis identify the principal dimensions through which social justice becomes transformative institutionally. Their relationship can be summarized through a central proposition: equity must be imagined, organized, and lived.

Domain 1, Enacting Visionary and Transformational Leadership, concerns equity imagined. It establishes and mobilizes an equitable aspiration, challenges the normalization of existing conditions, develops collective purpose, and provides direction against which institutional decisions can be evaluated. This domain preserves the indispensable role of vision while refusing to equate vision with transformation. Leithwood et al. (2020) locate direction setting within a broader leadership repertoire that also includes developing people and relationships, redesigning the organization, improving instruction, aligning resources, and monitoring progress. Within Social Justice Leadership Praxis, vision establishes where the institution intends to go, but its credibility depends upon what organizational members are willing to alter to get there.

Domain 2, Eliminating Barriers to Equitable Learning, concerns equity organized. It focuses attention on policies, structures, routines, resources, instructional arrangements, decision-making processes, access mechanisms, and other institutional conditions through which opportunity is produced and distributed. Irby et al. (2020) connect equity leadership explicitly with organizational improvement, emphasizing structures and routines through which equitable access, opportunity, and outcomes can become sustainable rather than dependent upon isolated actions. Weiler and Hinnant-Crawford (2021) similarly caution against layering worthwhile equity practices onto systems whose underlying structures continue to produce inequitable conditions. Domain 2 therefore asks whether the equitable aspiration articulated through Domain 1 has acquired organizational substance.

Domain 3, Promoting Positive School Climate, concerns equity lived. It attends to whether students, educators, families, and communities experience institutional life through relationships and practices characterized by recognition, dignity, voice, safety, participation, high expectations, support, and belonging. Bell's (2016) conception of social justice is especially important because it treats justice as both a goal and a process and joins questions of equitable distribution with recognition, participation, agency, and the ability to influence institutions and decisions. Bhowmik et al. (2023) likewise emphasize inclusive leadership that recognizes diversity and intersectionality and attends to how differently situated students experience organizational culture and participation. Thus, institutional justice cannot be inferred entirely from what policies say or resources provide; it must also be examined through how institutional arrangements are encountered.

Nor should imagined, organized, and lived be interpreted as a linear progression. Lived experience may reveal a barrier that requires structural change; structural analysis may expose an assumption requiring reconsideration of the institutional vision; a new vision may necessitate different relationships, resource allocations, or forms of participation. The domains continually provide information to one another. Social justice leadership praxis exists not simply because all three are present, but because each remains accountable to the others.

The reciprocal relationships represented in Figure 1 make this accountability explicit. An institution cannot credibly claim an equitable vision that its structures routinely obstruct. It cannot declare structural equity when those affected by its arrangements continue to experience exclusion, diminished voice, or unequal membership. Nor can a positive climate substitute for changes to institutional arrangements that continue to distribute opportunity inequitably. Equity imagined but not organized remains aspiration. Equity organized but not equitably lived remains incomplete. Equity experienced relationally but unsupported structurally remains precarious.

Targeted Universalism as an Operational Logic

Targeted universalism surrounds the three domains in Figure 1 because it serves a different conceptual purpose. It is not a fourth domain of social justice leadership. The three domains identify where social justice leadership praxis

must operate; targeted universalism helps organize how the work moves from a shared aspiration to differentiated action.

This distinction is important because the proposed framework does not attempt to absorb targeted universalism into another leadership theory or claim targeted universalism as an original component of social justice leadership scholarship. Rather, the framework draws upon targeted universalism because it provides a disciplined process for connecting universal aspiration, differential situatedness, structural analysis, targeted strategies, and evaluation. powell et al. (2019) define targeted universalism through universal goals pursued by targeted processes based upon how differently situated groups relate to structures, culture, and geography. Its purpose therefore aligns with a central problem of Social Justice Leadership Praxis: how can a shared equity commitment translate into action without assuming everyone encounters the institution from the same position or requires the same pathway?

The next movement makes Domain 2 especially notable. Targeted universalism requires institutions to determine how populations are situated relative to the universal goal and then examine the structures that support or impede their progress (powell et al., 2019). Differential outcomes therefore become signals for inquiry rather than evidence of deficiency within the people experiencing them. This orientation is compatible with both organizational approaches to equity leadership and systems-change scholarship, which redirect attention from correcting individuals toward examining the institutional arrangements through which disparities are produced (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Irby et al., 2020; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021).

Participation in this process must also be more than consultative. powell et al. (2019) argue that people historically excluded from decision making should exercise meaningful influence in defining goals and shaping strategies. This principle resonates with Bell's (2016) understanding of social justice as a process involving agency and democratic participation. Within Social Justice Leadership Praxis, lived experience therefore functions in two ways: as evidence about how institutional arrangements operate and as a source of legitimate knowledge and authority for determining how those arrangements should change.

From Universal Goal to Differentiated Action, Evidence, and Recalibration

The lower portion of Figure 1 condenses the operational movement of the framework. Although depicted visually as movement from universal goal to targeted action to transformational change, the process should not be understood as a simple three-step progression. The fuller targeted universalism process involves establishing a universal goal, assessing population performance relative to it, identifying groups and places positioned differently relative to that goal, examining the structures that support or impede their progress, and developing differentiated strategies capable of moving groups toward the shared aspiration (powell et al., 2019).

The strategies are differentiated because the institutional conditions are differentiated. Equality of aspiration does not imply sameness of intervention. Students who encounter different barriers may require different forms or levels of institutional response, and those responses may involve different allocations of resources. What makes those strategies coherent is not that everyone receives the same intervention, but that each intervention is intentionally connected to the same universal goal.

Evidence links action to transformation. An intervention cannot be presumed successful because its intent is equitable. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) distinguish data review from more developed systems of inquiry in which evidence continually informs changes to policy and practice, while Lacroix et al. (2024) connect an explicit equity aim to root-cause analysis, action, monitoring, and continuous improvement. When evidence shows that a strategy is not moving groups toward the shared goal, recalibration is not evidence of failure; it is part of praxis. In this framework, the recurring movement is from aspiration to inquiry, action, consequence, evidence, reflection, and revised action.

Transformational Change as the Consequence of Praxis

The final movement in Figure 1 is transformational change. Within Social Justice Leadership Praxis, transformation is not synonymous with activity, innovation, implementation, or change itself. Educational institutions regularly change policies, programs, personnel, curricula, schedules, structures, and priorities. Some of these changes may produce meaningful improvements. Yet transformational change requires a more demanding criterion: whether the institutional conditions that systematically produce inequitable opportunities and experiences have been altered.

Targeted universalism adds an important distinction between transactional and transformational change. Some barriers require immediate responses. A student who lacks transportation, language access, instructional support, safety, or another necessary condition should not be told to wait while leaders redesign an entire system. Transactional interventions can therefore be necessary and ethically appropriate. Yet powell et al. (2019) caution against allowing immediate remedies to substitute for structural change when the systems producing the problem remain intact. The more durable question is whether institutional arrangements can be altered so that the barrier is less likely to be reproduced.

Nor does transformational change constitute a final state after which equity leadership is complete. Organizational environments shift, populations change, personnel turn over, policy contexts evolve, and reforms themselves may generate unintended consequences. What once reduced a barrier may cease to do so. What appeared equitable from one vantage point may be experienced differently by people who were not originally included in the analysis. For this reason, sustainability should not be understood as preserving strategies indefinitely. Rather, sustainability concerns the institutionalization of the capacity for continued equity-centered inquiry and action.

The Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework does not offer educational leaders a formula for social justice. Its contribution, rather, lies in establishing a pathway for translating social justice from a stated commitment into an enduring organizational practice grounded in inquiry, action, participation, accountability, and transformation. Social justice leadership becomes praxis when equity no longer depends primarily upon what an institution says it values but becomes increasingly visible in what the institution repeatedly does, what it is willing to change, and what those changes make possible for the people it serves.

Implications for Leadership Preparation, Evaluation, and District Practice

The Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework has implications for how educational leaders are prepared, developed, evaluated, and positioned within school systems. If social justice leadership is understood as the recurring translation of equity commitments into organizational action, then leadership systems should not assess readiness or effectiveness primarily through leaders' stated values, knowledge of equity terminology, or participation in equity-related activities. The more pressing question is whether leaders possess—and are institutionally supported in exercising—the capacities required to imagine equity, organize conditions for its realization, examine how it is lived, and revise practice when evidence indicates that intended changes are insufficient.

Leadership Preparation and Professional Learning

Leadership preparation should therefore move beyond developing social justice awareness toward developing social justice praxis. Weiler and Lomotey (2022) argue that justice-oriented leadership preparation should connect critical understanding with opportunities to engage in transformative practice. Similarly, Porfilio et al. (2019) caution that naming social justice within a program is insufficient unless that commitment becomes operational through learning, inquiry, and practice. Preparation programs should consequently create opportunities for aspiring leaders to analyze disaggregated evidence, identify structural barriers, examine assumptions, engage communities whose perspectives have historically been marginalized, design equity-centered interventions, and evaluate the consequences of those interventions.

This orientation also suggests that leadership development should integrate the three domains rather than treating vision, organizational management, instructional leadership, and school climate as unrelated competencies. Aspiring and practicing leaders need opportunities to examine how a compelling equity vision can be undermined by institutional arrangements, how structural reforms can produce unintended relational consequences, and how lived experience can reveal barriers not visible through conventional performance indicators. Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) further remind us that leaders' interpretive capacities shape how they understand and enact social justice. Preparation for praxis must therefore cultivate both critical reflection and the ability to convert reflection into consequential organizational action.

Leadership Evaluation and Accountability

The framework also has implications for leadership evaluation. Traditional evaluations often emphasize whether leaders fulfilled responsibilities, implemented initiatives, maintained organizational stability, or demonstrated leadership competencies. Social Justice Leadership Praxis suggests a more purposeful standard: What changed because of the leadership, for whom, and with what evidence?

Evaluation should therefore examine the relationship among intention, action, and consequence. Evidence might include changes in access to rigorous learning opportunities, resource allocation, disciplinary patterns, participation in decision making, instructional conditions, student, and family experiences, belonging, or other outcomes connected to locally established equity goals. Lacroix et al. (2024) caution that professional learning may transform adults without necessarily transforming outcomes for students. The same distinction should apply to leadership evaluation. Participation in equity training, creation of an equity committee, adoption of new language, or implementation of an initiative may represent meaningful activity, but such activity should not itself be treated as evidence of equitable transformation.

At the same time, evaluation should recognize the recursive nature of praxis. Effective equity leadership does not require every intervention to succeed on its first attempt. Leaders should instead demonstrate the capacity to examine evidence, acknowledge when strategies are not producing intended outcomes, incorporate perspectives

that challenge existing assumptions, and recalibrate action. Within this framework, responsiveness to evidence is not evidence of failure; it is evidence of praxis.

District Leadership and Organizational Conditions

Finally, the framework places substantial responsibility on districts and governing systems. Educational organizations cannot demand transformational equity leadership while configuring roles, authority, resources, and accountability systems in ways that make such leadership difficult to enact. Irby et al. (2021) demonstrate this problem through their analysis of K–12 equity directors, whose capacity to influence district practice varied according to supervisory authority, access to senior leadership and governing boards, budgetary discretion, and influence over curriculum, instruction, and professional development. Districts therefore must examine whether the organizational conditions surrounding equity-focused roles are aligned with the outcomes those roles are expected to produce.

This implication extends beyond equity directors. Superintendents, principals, central-office administrators, and leadership teams require structures that permit cross-functional collaboration, meaningful participation by students and communities, access to relevant evidence, authority to address institutional barriers, and sufficient resources to sustain change. Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) similarly emphasize that equity leadership becomes more durable when it is distributed through organizational routines and collective capacity rather than remaining concentrated in a single leader. District responsibility therefore includes institutionalizing the conditions through which equity-centered inquiry and action can survive leadership transitions, competing priorities, and changing contexts.

The framework ultimately suggests that leadership preparation, evaluation, and district design should be aligned around the same principle that organizes Social Justice Leadership Praxis itself: Equity leadership should be judged not merely by what leaders know, value, or initiate, but by their capacity—supported by the organizations in which they work—to produce, examine, and sustain changes in the institutional conditions and experiences that shape educational opportunity.

Conclusion

The central challenge addressed in this article is not whether educational leaders can articulate commitments to equity, inclusion, and social justice. Increasingly, they can and do. The more consequential question is whether those commitments become embedded in the recurring decisions, structures, relationships, resource allocations, instructional priorities, and accountability practices through which educational institutions shape students' opportunities and experiences. The distinction between social justice orientation and social justice leadership praxis is therefore foundational. Orientation establishes what leaders believe and value; praxis asks what those commitments repeatedly produce.

The Social Justice Leadership Praxis Framework offers one conceptual response to that challenge. Its three domains—enacting visionary and transformational leadership, eliminating barriers to equitable learning, and promoting a positive school climate—represent mutually reinforcing dimensions of equity-centered organizational practice. Together, they suggest that equity must be imagined, organized, and lived. Vision establishes and mobilizes an equitable aspiration. Barrier removal examines and changes the structures that shape who can move toward that aspiration. Positive and inclusive school climate provides an experiential test of whether institutional commitments and structural changes are recognizable in the dignity, voice, participation, support, opportunity, and belonging people encounter in the daily life of the institution. No one domain is sufficient by itself.

Targeted universalism strengthens this design by supplying an operational logic for movement within and across the domains. A shared universal aspiration does not require identical strategies because students and communities are differently situated in relation to institutional structures and opportunities. Social justice praxis consequently requires leaders to examine those differences, investigate the conditions producing them, develop differentiated responses, evaluate whether those responses are moving groups toward the shared goal, and recalibrate when evidence indicates that they are not. In this way, equity is neither reduced to uniform treatment nor fragmented into disconnected initiatives for particular populations. Shared purpose and differentiated action remain connected through continuing inquiry and accountability.

The framework advanced here is conceptual rather than prescriptive. It does not offer a checklist for identifying a social justice leader or a sequence of practices that can be transferred unchanged across educational settings. Institutional histories, populations, resources, political environments, community relationships, and patterns of marginalization differ, and the enactment of praxis must remain responsive to those differences. The framework therefore requires further empirical examination across schools, districts, leadership roles, and educational contexts. Future research might investigate how the domains interact in practice, what organizational conditions strengthen or constrain their enactment, how leaders and communities identify meaningful evidence of progress, and whether the framework provides a useful basis for leadership preparation, evaluation, organizational learning, and sustained systems change.

Ultimately, the promise of social justice leadership does not reside in the eloquence of an equity statement, the adoption of a particular leadership identity, or the proliferation of equity-oriented programs. Its promise resides in whether institutions develop the capacity to translate commitments into effective action, examine what that action produces, and change themselves when the evidence demands it. Social justice leadership becomes transformational when equity is no longer primarily something an institution professes, but something people experience through the institution's everyday practices, evolving structures, and expanded opportunities to learn, participate, belong, and thrive.

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