

Collective Leadership for Equitable Instruction: Strategies and Impacts Across K–12 Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how school leadership teams drive equity-centered instructional practices in K–12 schools. It aimed to synthesize contemporary research to identify leadership behaviors, structures, and conditions that contribute to equitable student learning environments. This qualitative literature review examined 10 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025. Studies were selected based on their focus on instructional leadership, equity, and K–12 educational contexts. A thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and strategies across the literature. Five major themes emerged: (1) inclusive leadership that fosters shared decision-making and relational trust; (2) equity-focused leadership pipelines that prepare leaders to identify and address systemic barriers; (3) equity-oriented data practices that contextualize academic metrics and inform instructional change; (4) culturally responsive instruction supported by school-wide professional learning; and (5) collaborative leadership that centers family and community engagement. These themes were reinforced across studies involving varied contexts and leadership roles. The review was limited to studies published in English and focused primarily on U.S. educational contexts. Districts and policymakers can use these findings to design leadership preparation programs, refine professional development strategies, and align accountability frameworks with equity goals.

Keywords: collective leadership, equitable instruction, K-12 schools, equity-centered instructional practices, academic outcomes

In contemporary K–12 education, school leadership teams play an essential role in advancing equity-centered instructional practices. These teams—typically composed of principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and support personnel—are uniquely positioned to influence teaching and learning through shared decision-making, distributed leadership, and a strong commitment to inclusive excellence (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Rather than working in isolation, effective teams operate as learning communities that actively interrogate instructional practices and ensure every student has access to high-quality, culturally responsive learning experiences (Senge et al., 2012).

Addressing inequities in student achievement requires moving beyond surface-level reforms and adopting strategies that disrupt systemic marginalization. Research has shown that when instructional practices are tailored to the lived experiences of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students, academic engagement and performance improve (Johnson et al., 2023). Leadership teams that create cultures of high expectations, trust, and collaboration among staff foster collective teacher efficacy—a strong predictor of student success (Goddard et al., 2000). These environments are further enhanced when instructional practices align with asset-based perspectives and affirm students' identities (Theokas et al., 2019).

Equity-focused leadership teams embrace continuous learning, critically analyze data, and disrupt tracking systems that reproduce inequality (Johnson et al., 2017; Oakes, 2005). Their work is grounded in evidence-based strategies shown to impact learning at scale, including formative assessment, teacher clarity, and instructional feedback cycles (Marzano, 2003). This study synthesizes recent empirical findings to examine how school leadership teams are enacting these practices in

real-world settings. The purpose of this study was to investigate how school leadership teams drive equity-centered instructional practices in K–12 schools. It aims to synthesize contemporary research to identify leadership behaviors, structures, and conditions that contribute to equitable student learning environments. This study's guiding research question was: *How do school leadership teams cultivate equity-centered instructional practices that improve academic outcomes for historically underserved K–12 student populations?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective Leadership in Education

Collective leadership represents a paradigm shift from the traditional hierarchical model, fostering environments where knowledge and expertise are shared and enhancing overall performance (Hickey et al., 2022). Social learning theory, systems theory, and social constructionism provide a theoretical underpinning that collectively highlight collective leadership as a co-constructed phenomenon rather than a solitary role (Nadeem, 2024; Sachar, 2025). Social learning theory emphasizes that learning occurs through social interactions, suggesting that leadership skills can be developed collectively (Nadeem, 2024). Systems theory views organizations as complex systems in which leadership emerges from member interactions, promoting a holistic approach to leadership (Sachar, 2025). Social constructionism argues that leadership is constructed through social processes, allowing for diverse contributions from all members (Sachar, 2025).

The distinctions between collective leadership, instructional leadership, and traditional hierarchical leadership are significant, reflecting different approaches to governance and decision-making in educational settings. Traditional hierarchical leadership emphasizes control and compliance, thus prioritizing administrative efficiency over collaborative engagement (Li, 2024). While instructional leadership retains a hierarchical structure, it encourages collaboration among educators to achieve shared objectives (Noman, 2023). The collective leadership model can be seen in practices that distribute leadership roles across the school community, enhancing engagement and inclusivity (Eyong, 2024).

Collective leadership in education is conceptualized through various models and frameworks, notably Spillane's distributed leadership and Leithwood's transformational leadership. Leadership in education is not confined to formal leaders; it is distributed among all members of the organization, including teachers and students (Harris et al., 2022). The distributed leadership framework fosters teacher empowerment and collaborative efforts in the education sector, which can improve student outcomes and school effectiveness (Sachar, 2025). Leithwood's transformational leadership model focuses on how individuals interact within specific contexts, such as the education sector, highlighting the importance of both formal and informal leadership roles (Li, 2024). These frameworks offer valuable insights into collective leadership, and integrating them can create a more inclusive and effective educational environment.

Equitable Instruction in K–12 Education

Equitable instruction in K-12 education involves a range of strategies that are aimed at ensuring all students have access to high-quality learning experiences. This approach is characterized by inclusivity, cultural relevance, and student empowerment, which collectively foster a learning environment for diverse populations (González, 2025; Lotan, 2022; White et al., 2024). An inclusive, welcoming environment involves recognizing and celebrating diversity within the classroom (González, 2025). Empowerment and agency are crucial for fostering a positive learning experience for students (White et al., 2024). Equitable access to resources is also vital to level the playing field in diverse classrooms (Lotan, 2022).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are key pedagogical approaches that promote equity and enhance accessibility, resonating with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. CRP emphasizes the importance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, thus leading to students' engagement and performance (Stembridge, 2019). Stembridge (2019) adds that teachers should adapt lesson plans to reflect students' cultural contexts and use diverse teaching materials. On UDL, Cressey (2020) stated that it provides a framework for designing educational experiences that accommodate individual learning differences, thus minimizing barriers to learning. Alarcón and Pineda (2024) state that UDL promotes flexibility in teaching methods and materials by allowing educators to tailor their approaches to meet varied student needs. Strickland et al. (2023) argued that integrating UDL with CRP can improve instructional effectiveness by addressing both accessibility and cultural relevance. These approaches are vital for promoting equity in K-12 education by addressing teacher preparedness and systemic barriers within educational institutions.

Equitable instruction in K–12 education faces numerous challenges and barriers, particularly in diverse settings. Urban schools often lack the resources available in suburban counterparts, leading to significant achievement gaps and indicating institutional inequities (Glass et al., 2023). Staff biases and culturally limited policies hinder equitable access to education

for racial minorities (Marshall, 2024). Regarding access to resources, many students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, do not receive high-quality science instruction (Jones & Burrell, 2022). In terms of race, Black and Hispanic students face greater structural barriers in accessing computers and computer science education compared to their White peers (Wang & Hejazi Moghadam, 2017). Overcoming these systemic barriers is critical in creating resilience among students from marginalized backgrounds.

The Role of Collective Leadership in Promoting Equitable Instruction

Collective leadership plays a pivotal role in promoting equitable instruction by fostering collaboration among educators, families, and communities. Collaboration among educators, parents, and the community can enhance support for equity-oriented initiatives, leading to student success (Leithwood, 2021). Instructional leadership teams serve as the engine for promoting culturally responsive teaching, thus contributing to equity (Berg & Parad, 2024). Leaders who adopt an equity mindset can create well-resourced systems that support individualized learning and deeper engagement for all students (Kim & Oh, 2023). Beliefs about collective responsibility significantly influence public support for equity-oriented educational policies (Lee & Lee, 2023). Collective leadership is essential for fostering equitable instruction, which is crucial for sustaining equity in education.

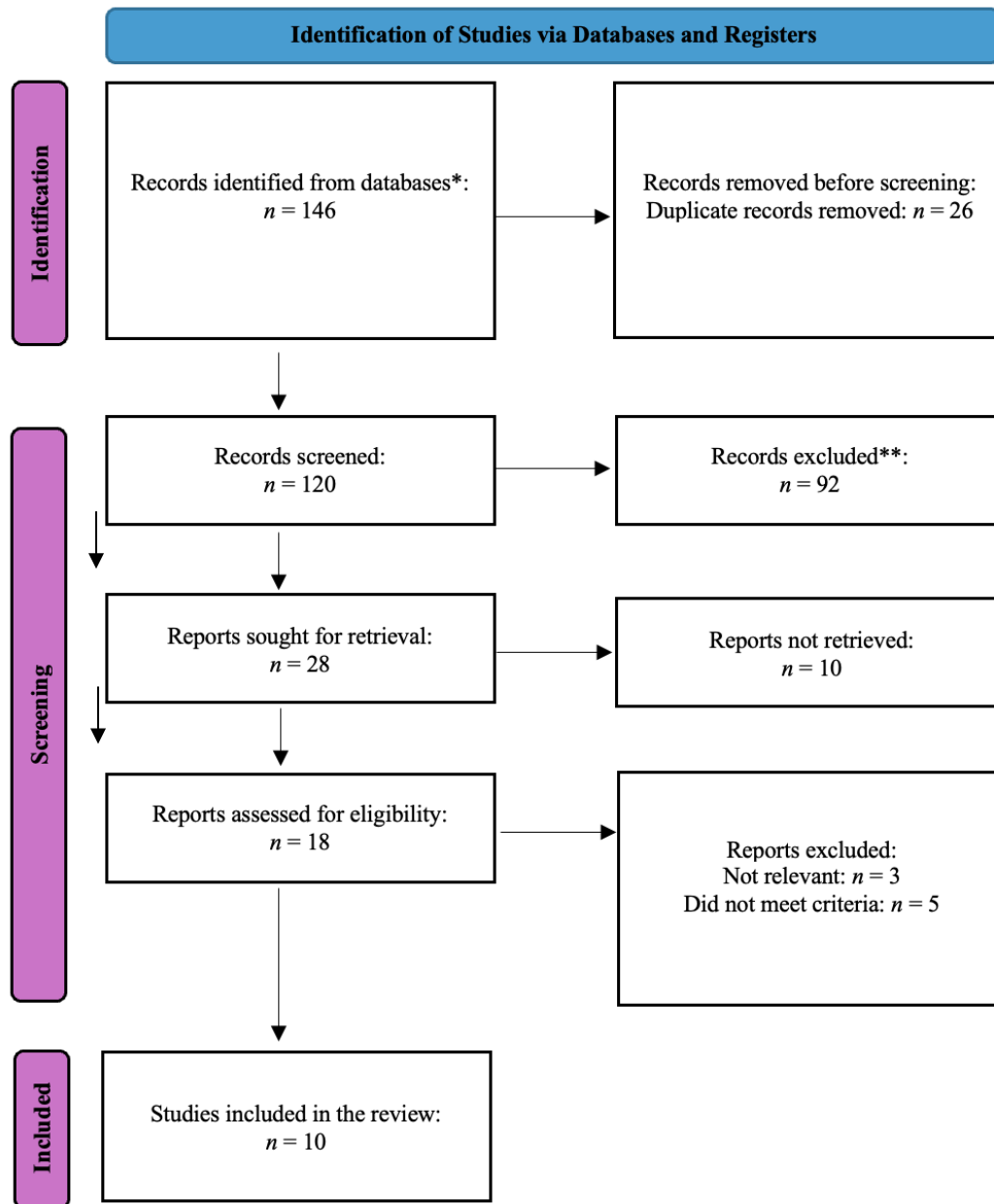
Collective leadership plays a crucial role in promoting equitable instruction through collaborative decision-making in curriculum and instruction. Instructional leadership has a direct positive effect on teachers' classroom practices and instructional quality (Bellibaş et al., 2022). Instructional leadership styles are associated with cultivating opportunities and a culture that encourages collaboration, which, in turn, influences the implementation of individualized education planning (Lambrecht et al., 2022). School leaders can contribute to more equitable conditions and outcomes for diverse students by encouraging culturally responsive instruction and building partnerships with parents and the community (Leithwood, 2021). Distributed leadership indirectly affects instructional quality through teacher collaboration and job satisfaction (Bellibaş et al., 2022). These findings emphasize the importance of collective leadership in fostering equitable instruction through collaborative decision-making processes in the educational context.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content synthesis of 10 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025. Articles were selected using the following criteria: (1) peer-reviewed publication after 2018, (2) US-based K–12 educational focus, (3) attention to leadership teams rather than individuals, and (4) analysis of instructional practices aimed at promoting equity.

Studies were identified using targeted search terms and Boolean operators: ("equity-centered" OR "equity-focused" OR "culturally responsive") AND ("instructional leadership" OR "collective leadership" OR "distributed leadership" OR "leadership team") AND ("K-12" OR "elementary school" OR "secondary school") AND ("instructional practices" OR "student outcomes"). The search was conducted using several academic databases that included ERIC (EBSCOhost), PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. A literature review matrix was used to chart and analyze studies along five dimensions: author/year, purpose, data collection methods, key findings, and equity-related instructional strategies.

The analytic process drew on principles of inductive thematic coding, guided by frameworks described in *Schools That Learn* (Senge et al., 2012) and grounded in the belief that schools function as learning organizations. Themes were developed through constant comparison and recursive reading of article findings (Thomas & Harden, 2008). In line with Johnson et al.'s (2019) approach to instructional transformation, particular attention was given to how leadership teams designed interventions, responded to student performance data, and supported culturally affirming pedagogy. The resulting synthesis aims to identify common strategies across diverse contexts while highlighting implications for leadership practice and policy. Figure 1 outlines the article identification progress.

Figure 1**PRISMA Flow Diagram**

Note. *Records identified across individual databases were not documented; **Automation tools were not used.

The final sample for this review consisted of 10 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025 that examined how school leadership teams cultivate equity-centered instructional practices. These studies were identified through a comprehensive search process that initially yielded 132 articles from academic databases and an additional 14 from other sources. After removing duplicates and screening abstracts for relevance, 28 full-text articles were assessed. Of those, 18 were excluded due to not meeting criteria related to setting, population, or methodological focus. The 10 studies included in the synthesis represent diverse K–12 contexts and use a range of qualitative, mixed-methods, and conceptual approaches to explore how leadership teams influence culturally responsive pedagogy, professional learning, instructional collaboration, and equitable student outcomes. Table 1 below describes the articles included in this review.

Table 1

Articles Included in the Study

Author	Date	Purpose	Data Collection	Study Findings
Bada et al.	2024	Examines leadership strategies to foster educational equity in higher education.	Theoretical analysis with policy review	Inclusive leadership and policy alignment with SDGs advanced equity for marginalized students.
Chikwe & Cooper	2019	Explores how school leaders use equity-related data to transform schools.	Phenomenological study	Data use as a diagnostic, roadmap, and conversational tool helped shift practices toward equity.
Eslinger	2023	Explores how leaders engage in culturally responsive practices to shift school culture and pedagogy.	Case study with interviews	Leadership involved a reorientation to justice, emphasizing community voice and inclusive instructional changes.
Gooden et al.	2023	Synthesizes literature to design equity-centered principal pipelines.	Conceptual analysis	CRSL framework highlights the need for systemic support and culturally responsive practices.
Kyere	2021	Investigates how Black school leaders interpret and navigate racialized educational spaces.	Narrative inquiry	Leaders drew from personal and professional experiences to resist deficit-based logics and create affirming spaces.
Leithwood	2021	Reviews 63 empirical studies on equitable school leadership practices.	Systematic review	Effective practices included building community partnerships and promoting culturally responsive instruction.
Marshall & Galey-Horn	2024	Examines how abolitionist frameworks reshape instructional leadership to address systemic injustice in schools.	Qualitative interviews and document analysis	Leaders resisted state accountability systems and re-centered collective wellbeing and justice.
Murwanto	2024	Reviews the importance of inclusive leadership in addressing diversity and discrimination in schools.	Literature review	Inclusive leadership supports equity by disrupting exclusionary practices and affirming student identities.
Peters et al.	2025	Explores the development of equity-focused leadership competencies in principal preparation programs.	Mixed-methods	Programs that integrated equity coursework and community-based experiences had stronger leadership outcomes.
Robinson	2024	Analyzes district-level equity initiatives and their effect on school practices and outcomes.	Policy analysis and interviews	Strategic equity leadership included aligning policies and resources with community needs.

RESULTS

The review of 10 peer-reviewed empirical studies revealed five cross-cutting themes that characterize how leadership teams cultivate equity-centered instructional practices in K–12 schools: (1) inclusive leadership as a foundation for equity, (2) equity-focused leadership pipelines, (3) equity-oriented data practices, (4) culturally responsive instruction, and (5) collaborative leadership and community engagement. These themes reflect shared strategies across diverse contexts and inform the collective work of school leaders seeking to dismantle systemic inequities in teaching and learning. Table 2 below describes which article contributed to each theme.

Table 2

Themes and Contributing Articles

Theme	Contributing Articles
Inclusive Leadership as a Foundation for Equity	Kyere, 2021; Leithwood, 2021; Murwanto, 2024;
Equity-Focused Leadership Pipelines	Gooden et al., 2023; Peters et al., 2025
Equity-Oriented Data Practices	Chikwe & Cooper, 2019; Kyere, 2021; Robinson, 2024
Culturally Responsive Instruction	Bada et al., 2024; Gooden et al., 2023; Leithwood, 2021
Collaborative Leadership and Community Engagement	Eslinger, 2023; Kyere, 2021

Inclusive Leadership as a Foundation for Equity

Three studies—Murwanto (2024), Leithwood (2021), and Kyere (2021)—provided strong evidence of inclusive leadership as a key mechanism for equity transformation. Murwanto (2024) emphasized that inclusive leadership disrupts traditional hierarchies and supports shared decision-making, helping dismantle systemic exclusion in schools. The study framed inclusive leadership as relational and values-driven, focusing on community engagement and dialogic problem-solving.

Leithwood (2021) illustrated that inclusive leadership improves outcomes by fostering trust-based relationships between school leaders, students, and families. In this study, leaders who cultivated respectful relationships were more effective at supporting culturally responsive practices and ensuring that instructional decisions reflected diverse student needs.

Kyere (2021) contributed a racial and cultural dimension to the discussion by focusing on Black principals. The study found that these leaders operated from a place of cultural affirmation and care, intentionally making students and families feel seen and valued. This form of inclusion extended beyond formal processes and reflected deeper social-emotional commitments to community.

Equity-Focused Leadership Pipelines

Gooden et al. (2023) and Peters et al. (2025) highlighted the role of structured leadership development in cultivating equity-minded school leaders. Gooden et al. (2023) documented how district leaders intentionally created and supported leadership pipelines designed to develop culturally responsive school leaders. These pipelines emphasized sustained professional development, reflection on bias, and alignment between leadership training and equity outcomes.

Peters et al. (2025) explored an equity-focused leadership preparation program that used coaching and inquiry cycles to shift participants' thinking and practice. The program helped aspiring leaders identify systemic inequities in their schools and take concrete steps to address them through instructional leadership. Together, these studies demonstrate the value of proactive, intentional leadership development strategies in building capacity for equity at scale.

Equity-Oriented Data Practices

Chikwe and Cooper (2019), Robinson (2024), and Kyere (2021) showed how leadership teams used data not just to monitor performance but to confront and correct inequities. Chikwe and Cooper (2019) highlighted how principals moved beyond basic data interpretation to engage in data-informed storytelling. By contextualizing numbers with student experiences, leaders fostered deeper conversations about equity and accountability within their schools. Robinson (2024) described using data strategically to address disproportionate enrollment in advanced courses and reduce biased referrals to interventions. In this study, school leaders actively examined patterns that limited student access and then implemented policy changes based on those findings. Kyere (2021) echoed these practices by showing how Black principals used data

not only to inform academic decisions but also to advocate for cultural and social inclusion. Data was framed as a tool for justice, not just management, reinforcing the importance of interpretation skills alongside technical use.

Culturally Responsive Instruction

Leithwood (2021), Bada et al. (2024), and Gooden et al. (2023) examined how leadership influences the promotion of culturally responsive instruction. Leithwood (2021) documented how leaders created conditions that encouraged instructional practices aligned with students' cultural identities and lived experiences. The study emphasized that these leaders prioritized student voice and culturally relevant curriculum in school improvement efforts. Bada et al. (2024) focused on the impact of professional development. The authors found that teachers were more likely to challenge deficit thinking and adopt inclusive pedagogies when leadership teams actively supported learning about cultural responsiveness. These efforts had measurable effects on student engagement and classroom climate. Gooden et al. (2023) provided a leadership development perspective, showing how new principals trained in culturally responsive leadership practices guided teachers toward more inclusive instructional strategies. These findings suggest that school leaders serve as critical catalysts for building and sustaining culturally affirming environments.

Collaborative Leadership and Community Engagement

Eslinger (2023) and Kyere (2021) explored the ways leadership teams engage families and communities as co-creators in school change. Eslinger (2023) described how school leaders shifted governance models to elevate community voice, particularly in curriculum design and disciplinary policy. These actions increased school responsiveness and student belonging. Kyere (2021) again emphasized the importance of culturally grounded leadership, noting that trust-building with families was central to success. Leaders in the study took intentional steps to honor cultural identity and shared power with community members in shaping school practices.

DISCUSSION

This study synthesized findings from 10 peer-reviewed empirical articles to explore how leadership teams cultivate equity-centered instructional practices in K–12 schools. The thematic analysis revealed five interrelated strategies: inclusive leadership, equity-focused leadership pipelines, equity-oriented data practices, culturally responsive instruction, and collaborative leadership with community engagement. These themes reinforce the body of scholarship calling for systemic, leader-driven efforts to dismantle persistent educational inequities.

The results align closely with existing literature on effective school leadership. DuFour and Marzano (2011) emphasized that meaningful instructional leadership must be anchored in collaboration, trust, and a shared vision for student success. The findings from this review affirm that inclusive leadership practices—grounded in relational trust and shared responsibility—are foundational to advancing equity goals. Murwanto (2024), Leithwood (2021), and Kyere (2021) show that inclusive leadership practices break down traditional power hierarchies and promote shared decision-making. These practices align with the principles of distributed and transformational leadership, as the literature review indicates.

Developing equity-minded leaders through intentional pipelines also reflects the urgent need for targeted leadership preparation programs. As Hattie (2023), Goddard et al. (2000), Gooden et al. (2023), and Peters et al. (2025) have argued, leadership efficacy significantly affects student outcomes, especially when leaders can foster collective efficacy among teachers. The studies reviewed here suggest that when equity is embedded into leadership development—through reflective inquiry, mentoring, and culturally responsive training—leaders are more likely to recognize and act on systemic disparities (Johnson et al., 2017). These findings correspond with systems theory, which conceptualizes schools as interrelated systems that influence the broader organization (Sachar, 2025).

Data use also emerged as an important lever for advancing equity. Unlike traditional data practices that focus narrowly on achievement gaps, the reviewed studies illustrate how equity-focused leaders use data for inquiry and transformation (Chikwe & Cooper, 2019; Robinson, 2024; Kyere, 2021). This mirrors Kim and Oh's (2023) work, which found that equity audits and data-informed leadership can drive advocacy, reflection, and school reform.

In terms of pedagogy, the findings support Oakes' (2005) assertion that schooling structures often track students inequitably unless disrupted by intentional, culturally responsive instructional practices. Leadership teams that center identity-affirming curriculum and engage in ongoing professional learning can shift teaching practices away from deficit models and toward equity-oriented, inclusive instruction (Johnson et al., 2019; Theokas et al., 2019). This aligns with the UDL framework, which focuses on accessible, flexible instruction (Alarcón & Pineda, 2024; Cressey, 2020). The emphasis on CRP as a leadership strategy also reaffirms previous scholarship on CRP's role in equitable teaching (Bada et al., 2024;

Stembridge, 2019). The reviewed studies emphasized that such pedagogical shifts require not only teacher-level action, but school-wide leadership support and alignment.

Finally, the significance of authentic community engagement cannot be overstated. Consistent with Eslinger (2023) and Kyere (2021), who argue that learning organizations must be deeply participatory, this review found that schools advancing equity were those where leaders fostered reciprocal relationships with families and community members. Collaborative leadership and community engagement form part of the tenets of social constructionism, which views leadership and knowledge as shaped through interactions and shared experiences (Sachar, 2025). Community voice was not treated as an external input but as a core influence on school policy and instructional practice.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this systematic review suggest that equity is not an incidental outcome of leadership, but an intentional, sustained commitment embedded in organizational culture and daily practices. Hence, leadership teams must move beyond technical compliance models and toward systemic, value-driven leadership. Building inclusive school cultures that foster authentic partnerships with families and communities, embedding equity in leadership development through investment in equity-centered leadership development programs, and using data narratively can help drive instructional change through integrating equity-focused data practices into school improvement plans. Moreover, professional development must be ongoing and grounded in cultural responsiveness, not just one-time training sessions (Johnson et al., 2019).

Policy efforts should focus on funding and scaling leadership development programs that prioritize equity through shared governance and distributed responsibilities (Gooden et al., 2023). State and district policy should support data systems that allow for nuanced interpretation, and incentives should be provided for schools that build genuine community partnerships. Additionally, accountability frameworks must reflect relational and cultural outcomes—not only test scores (Hattie, 2023; Marzano, 2003).

Future research should explore how these five themes manifest across different school contexts (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban) and within various student populations. Longitudinal studies would help determine the sustained impact of equity-centered leadership interventions. More research is also needed on the intersection of race, leadership identity, and instructional decision-making, particularly in historically marginalized communities (Johnson et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Based on the study results and discussion, equity in K–12 instruction advances most effectively when leadership is inclusive, collaborative, culturally grounded, and justice-oriented. To dismantle systemic barriers and create an educational environment where students from different cultural backgrounds can learn, schools should adopt a collective leadership framework. This will allow schools to navigate complex equity challenges. Strategies identified in this study's implications provide a roadmap for sustainable, transformative change in education.

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