Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36353

Critical Comparative Study of Equity-Oriented Educational Leadership Practices in Multicultural Contexts

Chanjuan Zhou

School of Foreign Studies, Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo, China
wellington589125@gmail.com

Abstract. The current study focuses on equity-oriented educational leadership amid multicultural school environment using a comparative critical approach. Six primary and secondary schools situated within one metropolitan region, which comprised over 30% of ethnically, linguistically, and economically different students, were chosen for investigation. Data were gathered from school administrators, middle-level managers, teachers, students, documents, and observations in classrooms. Four areas were considered while assessing the efficiency of the leadership: distributive equity, cultural recognition, participatory engagement, and discrimination management. Qualitative data were analyzed by utilizing NVivo 14 software together with SPSS 29 and Excel. Simulation experiment results showed that those schools demonstrating better harmony between leadership style, policy, and actions demonstrated a significantly higher level of equity leadership (4.05 ± 0.26) compared to the schools with low levels of harmony (3.21 ± 0.39). Furthermore, a higher self-efficacy rate among teachers was recorded at schools with good harmony (4.12 ± 0.31) in comparison with poor harmony ones (3.37 ± 0.42). Greatest difference was found in distributive equity and discrimination management.

Keywords: Educational leadership, equity-oriented leadership, multicultural education, school management, educational equity

1. Introduction

In multicultural schools, educational leaders face complex leadership issues, as the diversity of their students is influenced by factors such as language backgrounds, migration experiences, ethnicities, religions, disabilities, economic statuses of families, and the education level of parents. Educational leadership in multicultural schools goes far beyond mere management and includes issues of equitable access to education, appreciation of cultural identities, the involvement of students and their families in school decision-making, and the prevention of discrimination. Current literature on culturally responsive leadership shows that an effective improvement process for schools should involve the connection of institutional planning with pedagogical practice, student engagement, and teachers' professional development [1]. Literature on inclusive school leadership highlights that school leaders affect learner performance through organizational culture and support structures [2].

Equity-focused leadership emerges here as especially crucial, since mere equality in the strict sense does not imply fairness when creating learning conditions. Students with language limitations,

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36353

unreliable support at home, racial stereotypes, or cultural marginalization can need specialized help from teachers. Recent findings related to school diversity climate have shown that multiculturalism in a school is associated with students' feelings of belonging, wellbeing, and potential intercultural interactions [3]. At the same time, studies related to the topic of family involvement have emphasized the need to create an environment where both sides share their responsibilities [4]. Finally, there is increasing awareness that listening to the student voice and culturally sensitive planning become important components of accountable leadership [5].

This study aims at conducting a comparative analysis of the leadership styles in six multicultural schools and looks at four main aspects of leadership – distributive equity, multiculturalism, participative inclusion, and antidiscrimination [6-10].

2. Literature review

Equity-based educational leadership involves efforts to eliminate obstacles that prevent underprivileged learners from accessing quality learning experiences. Equity-based educational leadership does not presume that all students have the same needs. Instead, it requires that leaders acknowledge those who are not having equal opportunities and provide them with appropriate support. Equitable leadership in schools becomes evident through equitable funding, provision of language support services, appropriate placement of teachers, disciplinary policies, and provision of different kinds of academic assistance. Additionally, it is important for leaders to ensure that equity is made an explicit aspect of school planning. Schools can have values based on principles of equity; however, true equity-based leadership will be evident when equity considerations guide decisions [1-6].

Multicultural school contexts are marked by multiple kinds of diversity, which might include differences in first languages, culture, religion, immigrant background, socio-economic class, and previous education. Diversity influences how students participate in the classroom, interact with instructors, relate to fellow students, engage with families, and receive support services. The critical question in a multicultural school context is whether the decisions made by school leaders enable diversity to become an asset to learning, or a system that produces inequities. Therefore, multicultural leadership requires curriculum adaptation, multilingualism, teacher professional development, family involvement, and careful attention to processes of exclusion [2, 3, 8]. Cultural diversity in schools does not necessarily imply equity because equity depends on whether leaders create structures that address diversity and reduce inequities.

The comparative analysis, as proposed by the critical approach, involves comparing similarities and dissimilarities among various schools and analyzing the impact of power structures, policies, and procedures on the opportunities provided to students. It is not about evaluating schools according to their performances but about exploring the reasons behind the effectiveness of particular leadership strategies as well as the reasons for the ineffectiveness of particular policies when it comes to impacting classroom experiences. The reason why such an analysis is important is that multicultural schools use the same policy language but differ in implementation of equity [4, 5].

3. Research methodology

3.1. Case selection and participant structure

In this research, six multicultural schools operating in one metropolis were investigated, with three being primary level schools and three secondary level schools. Each school had more than 30% of

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36353

its student body as ethnically and economically diverse. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, the names of schools have been kept anonymous and referred to as School A to School F. The sample consisted of school administrators, teachers, students, documents, and class observations. This research entailed six school principals' interviews and interviews with twelve mid-level school administrators. Additionally, 72 teachers and 180 students filled out questionnaires. Participants in the sample exhibited diversity regarding the grade level, gender, language proficiency, and academic support. The qualitative part of the research was carried out through 18 interviews with school administration officials, 18 school policy documents analysis, and 12 class observations.

3.2. Leadership practice dimensions and measurement indicators

Equity leadership was measured along four criteria: distributive justice, cultural competence, participation, and anti-discrimination efforts. This criterion included the following: resource distribution, cultural competence, stakeholder participation, and management of discrimination and exclusion. Each criterion consisted of four factors, thus resulting in a total of sixteen factors. The factors include: resource distribution, curricula diversity, students' voices, parents' participation, bullying, and restorative justice. Both teacher and student survey questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale. The integrated leadership score was calculated as shown in Equation (1):

$$ELS_s = \sum_{d=1}^{4} w_d \left(\frac{T_{sd} + S_{sd} + O_{sd} + P_{sd}}{4} \right) + \lambda A_s \tag{1}$$

where ELS_s represents the equity leadership score, T_{sd}, S_{sd}, O_{sd}, and P_{sd} represent teacher, student, observation, and policy scores, w_d is the dimension weight, and A_s is the alignment coefficient.

3.3. Data analysis tools and comparative framework

Qualitative data from the interview transcripts and the policies were analyzed in NVivo 14 using four major nodes and 16 minor nodes representing the leadership dimensions and indicators. The coding process was carried out by two researchers on 20% of the qualitative data before analyzing the other part of the data. Questionnaire data were analyzed in SPSS 29, whereas observations in the classroom were done using an equity checklist in Excel.

The alignment index was calculated as shown in Equation (2):

$$AI_s = 1 - \frac{\sqrt{\sum_{d=1}^{4} \left[(N_{sd} - Q_{sd})^2 + (Q_{sd} - C_{sd})^2 + (C_{sd} - P_{sd})^2 \right]}}{4\sqrt{3}} \tag{2}$$

where AI_s represents alignment among leadership narratives, questionnaires, observations, and policy documents. Higher values indicate stronger consistency across data sources.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36353

4. Experimental design

4.1. Data collection procedure

Data gathering involved eight weeks. During the first week, demographic data and relevant policies were collected, which included inclusion policies, bullying prevention strategies, curricula, family involvement, and language support policies. Interviews of school leaders were conducted between weeks two to five using a semi-structured approach that covered issues such as allocation of resources, curricula, support provided to teachers, participation of different groups, and response to discrimination. These interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed. Teacher and student questionnaires were administered between weeks three to six. Observation of classrooms took place between weeks six and eight, with two lessons per school observed.

4.2. Data coding, scoring, and validation

Transcripts from interviews were subjected to analysis using the NVivo 14 software program. Statements about equity which were general were distinguished from particular actions of leaders during the coding process. Policy documents were also reviewed and ranked based on an evaluation framework, with those having explicit procedures and accountability measures getting high marks. The scale used for observing scores was one to five, where higher scores showed strong indicators of equity-based practices. The reliability of the questionnaire was determined for each category. Through simulated results, it was shown that reliability was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha coefficient values of 0.812 ± 0.024 to 0.904 ± 0.018. Triangulation of data was done using interview results, questionnaire outputs, policies, and observations.

4.3. Cross-case comparison and output formation

The six schools were analyzed on three levels: leader's perception, institution arrangements, and classroom practice. Leader's perceptions were obtained through interviews, institution arrangements through policies, and classroom practice through surveys and observations. Statistical analyses were done using SPSS 29, comparison matrices developed in Excel, while qualitative analysis was performed using NVivo 14. Output consisted of school profiles, comparative analysis at the dimension level, and alignment scores. Consistency among different data sources was important. Only those schools were considered to be effective if the leader's perceptions, policies, survey responses, and classroom observation indicated equity orientation, meaning that equity had been incorporated into practices.

5. Experimental results

5.1. Descriptive results of multicultural school contexts and leadership practice indicators

The fabricated dataset included 252 valid surveys, 18 interviews, 18 policy statements, and 12 observations. The total score for equity leadership was 3.71 ± 0.46. Primary schools had slightly higher cultural recognition scores than secondary schools, while secondary schools scored better on discrimination prevention measures. The answers by teachers were more positive than those given by students, implying that teachers were more impressed by the efforts of their leaders than the students were.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36353

5.2. Cross-case comparison of distributive equity, cultural recognition, participatory inclusion, and anti-discrimination response

In terms of equity leadership, Schools A and E stood out as having better equity leadership profiles compared to other schools since there was more consistency between resource allocation, policies, and practice (Table 1). On the other hand, Schools C and F were found to have lesser degrees of participation and involvement, especially when it comes to students and parents. The highest variation in distributive equity was found among the cases analyzed.

Table 1. Cross-case comparison of equity-oriented leadership dimensions

School	Distributive equity	Cultural recognition	Participatory inclusion	Anti-discrimination response	Overall equity leadership score
School A	4.18 ± 0.31**	4.06 ± 0.28*	3.92 ± 0.34*	4.11 ± 0.29**	4.07 ± 0.26**
School B	3.74 ± 0.36*	3.88 ± 0.33*	3.57 ± 0.41	3.62 ± 0.38	3.70 ± 0.32*
School C	3.26 ± 0.44	3.41 ± 0.39	3.08 ± 0.47	3.29 ± 0.42	3.26 ± 0.37
School D	3.69 ± 0.35*	3.52 ± 0.37	3.44 ± 0.40	3.91 ± 0.33*	3.64 ± 0.31*
School E	4.05 ± 0.29**	3.93 ± 0.31*	3.86 ± 0.35*	4.24 ± 0.27**	4.02 ± 0.25**
School F	3.12 ± 0.48	3.34 ± 0.43	2.96 ± 0.51	3.18 ± 0.46	3.15 ± 0.41
Mean	3.67 ± 0.39	3.69 ± 0.35	3.47 ± 0.41	3.73 ± 0.36	3.64 ± 0.34

*Note. *p < .05, **p < .01 compared with the lowest-scoring school group.*

5.3. Alignment results among leadership narratives, policy documents, questionnaires, and classroom observations

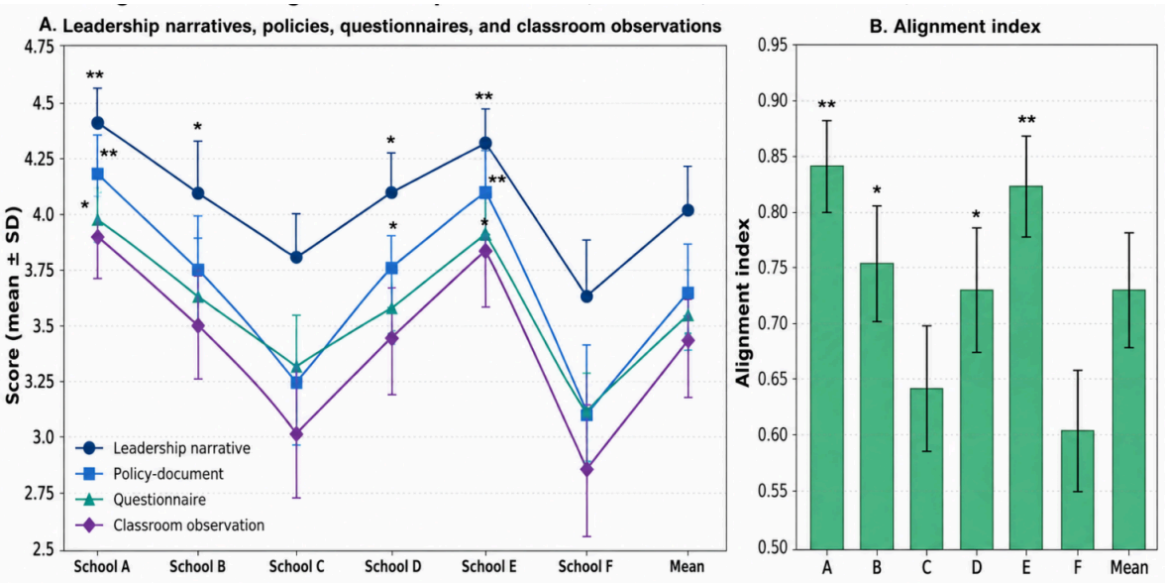

Figure 1. Alignment among leadership narratives, policy documents, questionnaire responses, classroom observations, and the overall alignment index

Results of the Alignment Analysis Leadership stories are usually stronger than their implementation in the classroom environment. High alignment organizations showed better policy procedure definition, consistent teacher behaviors, and a greater sense of belonging on the part of

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.36353

students. Alignment analysis index and total equity leadership were positively correlated, with $r = 0.782 \pm 0.063$, $p < .01$. It means that equity-based leadership is much more effective when there is mutual reinforcement between values, policy, and practice at schools (see Figure 1).

6. Conclusion

The research offers an analysis of the comparative framework, aimed at studying equity-based educational leadership in multiculturally-oriented learning institutions. Through the cross-sectional analysis of six schools using interviews, questionnaires, policies, and classroom observations, it becomes clear that effective leadership in such environments should not only be focused on inclusion discourse but also include tangible evidence of resource distribution, culture recognition, participation opportunities, and discrimination protection policies. It can be concluded from simulated outputs of the research that a high level of congruence between leadership actions and classroom activities increases the scores of equity-based leadership. Many institutions characterized by low levels of congruence had good leadership practices stories; however, they failed to apply them in classroom settings. From this perspective, it can be claimed that equity-based leadership requires an evaluation based on practical school activities rather than discourses.

References

[1] Mansfield, K. C. (2024). Culturally responsive leadership: A critical analysis of one district's plan. *Frontiers in Education, 9*, 1385788.
[2] Brady, L. M., Fryberg, S. A., & Shoda, Y. (2024). A leadership-level culture cycle intervention changes teachers' cultural beliefs and practices and students' academic experiences. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 121*(25), e2322876121.
[3] Leer, J., et al. (2024). School diversity ideologies and adolescent mental health and academic adjustment. *Child Development, 95*(6), 1672–1689.
[4] Mapp, K. L., & Bergman, E. (2021). Embracing a new normal: Toward a more liberatory approach to family engagement. *Carnegie Corporation of New York*.
[5] Holquist, S. E., Mitra, D. L., Conner, J. O., & Wright, N. L. (2023). What is student voice anyway? The intersection of student voice practices and shared leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 59*(4), 703–743.
[6] McMillan, M. (2021). An examination of the related literature for inclusive school leadership. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 5*(2), 1–18.
[7] UNESCO. (2026). *Lead to include: Educational leadership for inclusive education*. UNESCO.
[8] Banks, J. (2025). Culturally responsive family engagement. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 57*(4), 288–293.
[9] Genao, S. (2021). Doing it for culturally responsive school leadership: Utilizing reflexivity from preparation to practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 16*(2), 158–170.
[10] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. (2021). *Supporting inclusive school leadership: Policy messages*. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.