A systematic review of systems leadership in education: taking a social justice lens

Terra Glowach

Published online: 20 Mar 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A systematic review of systems leadership in education: taking a social justice lens

Terra Glowach

School of Education and Childhood, College of Health, Science & Society, UWE Bristol, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT
Early conceptual work on systems leadership in education emphasized social justice concerns, often through reference to the 'moral purpose' of those in positional authority. However, over time, we have seen a shift in focus from moral purpose to instrumentalism and a critique of hierarchical power dynamics. By revisiting the centrality of moral purpose in early conceptual work, clarifying its import and tracking its narrative through international education research, this systematic review of systems leadership in education research (2005–2023) identifies three waves of education literature which evolve from conceptual to critical, revealing key constraints and opportunities for applying a social justice lens. Despite obstacles including the co-option of systems leadership by 'top-down' managerialist structures, this review also highlights concrete recommendations in the literature on how systems leadership can be reclaimed for the purpose of addressing specific and entrenched social injustices such as systemic racism in schools.

Introduction

When systems leadership was first applied to schools in education literature, *moral purpose* was central to its conceptualization (Collarbone & West-Burnham, 2008; Fullan, 2004; D. Hargreaves, 2007; Hatcher, 2008; Hopkins, 2009). This centrality was premised on the argument that in order to sustainably address achievement gaps, school leaders had to engage with their communities and act via professional networks. Specifically, in Hopkins (2009) report 'The emergence of systems leadership', he defined the moral purpose of English school leaders as striving for 'equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture . . . [and] giving communities a sense of worth and empowerment' (5). Collarbone and West-Burnham's book *Understanding Systems Leadership* (2008) quoted Hargreaves and Fink to illustrate how systems leadership can promote greater equity and inclusion:

> The leadership of organizations as natural systems wedded to modern networked communication patterns can help us work with rather than against the cultural diversity of our students . . . collective, multiple and light-touch forms of accountability are one of the many

strategies for restoring the rich diversity that years of standardization have depleted or destroyed (A. Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 190)

In the most recent and thorough review of systems leadership in education (Harris et al., 2021), however, moral purpose is largely implicit through narratives of school improvement; the terms equity and inclusivity are notably absent. This may be due to the conceptual ambiguity of moral purpose, e.g. what is equity in education? Appels et al'.s systematic review of how equity is conceptualized in education research found deep underlying complexities, but when looking specifically at the application of equity to schools they found that a 'correlation between achievement and student characteristics unrelated to effort or talent could be considered as inequity' (Appels et al., 2023, p. 15). In other words, equitable school systems would minimize the extent to which characteristics such as household income, gender or race affected academic achievement. In this sense, equity becomes synonymous with social justice.

This paper systematically reviews systems leadership research in international education literature to trace the narrative of moral purpose as defined above. The further aim of this review is to assess the fitness of systems leadership research in education to respond to specific and persistent social injustices. To illustrate the necessity of this review, we might consider the example of systemic racism in English schools and consider the potential insights which emerge from literature beyond UK borders.

The concept of systemic racism is a tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which ascribes racial inequalities to white supremacy at the *systems* level (Bell, 1987, 1992; Brooks & Watson, 2019; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Unlike individual acts of racism, it is argued that systemic racism works through formalized processes. In the case of English schools, these formalized processes may include teacher recruitment and promotion resulting in an overrepresentation of white teaching staff, particularly at senior levels (Department for Education [DfE], 2023), exam board specifications that exclude nonwhite representation (Elliott et al., 2021) and/or behavior management policies and safeguarding practices which particularly endanger students of color (Bei, et al., 2021; Demie, 2021; Gamble & McCallum, 2022).

Systemic racism, as defined above, has the characteristics of a 'wicked problem', a term coined by Rittel and Webber (1973) to describe complex and hard to define social problems which are resistant to top-down, technical-rationalist solutions. Wicked problems typically involve a diverse range of stakeholders who experience and frame the problem differently, and it can also be hard to distinguish a wicked problem from its symptoms (Southgate et al., 2013). For example, the disproportionate exclusion rates among black students in England may be seen as a wicked problem in and of itself, or a symptom of 'wicked' systemic racism at the national, regional or school level. Compounding this complexity is the struggle to identify a single, clear line of causation as there are many interrelated factors at play in the antecedents to exclusion (NEU, 2021; Siddique, 2020). This complexity can make the problem seem intractable, because 'choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution' (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 169). In other words, until stakeholders can agree what causes the problem, they are unable to formulate and enact a solution.

Bolden et al. work on wicked health and social care problems in England (2020) found that a systems leadership approach can enable stakeholders to tackle these complexities. Across 12 case studies of health and social care projects, the employment of an expert

'enabler' opened inclusive and adaptive spaces where collective capacity could be mobilized to articulate the problems at hand and take action to address them. Benefits to this approach extended beyond immediate and operational concerns, galvanizing staff at all levels to become proactive in confronting and dealing with problems as they arose. A collective and nonhierarchical sense of responsibility provided the dynamic forces needed to address wicked social health problems such as social isolation and alcohol abuse. Systemic racism has also been diagnosed as a wicked problem in the health sector (Came & Griffith, 2018), and so together with the case studies mentioned above, an argument is forming in health sector literature for a systems leadership approach to tackle systemic racism.

In education research on English *schools*, it is much harder to find work on wicked problems or systems leadership applied to racism, despite long-term and well-evidenced racial inequalities in the English school system (Alexander et al., 2015; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). As the review below will demonstrate, the academic discourse in the UK focuses primarily on managerialism and a debate over top-down vs bottom-up approaches to leadership. For example, recent years have seen a trend toward top-down managerialism, technicizing the teaching practice at the expense of sociological approaches (Hordern & Brooks, 2023); however, this is the precise imbalance that conceptual and empirical writing on 'wickedity' seeks to redress. Much as Rittel and Webber wrote their 1973 paper to challenge the misconception that technical-rationalist solutions were the answer to complex social problems, Bore and Wright (2009) employed 'wickedity' to confront the overreliance on technical-rationalist approaches in policy directed at teacher education. The same challenge is being made now, only stronger: that the current 'what works' policy agenda in England is evading and obscuring solutions to the complex social problem of systemic racism (Cushing, 2023).

In response to the problem above, this review addresses three questions:

(1) How has the moral purpose of systems leadership in schools been addressed by education researchers over time?
(2) How has systems leadership been applied to social justice issues in education such as equity, inclusion and systemic racism?
(3) To what extent do education research findings support a systems leadership approach to tackling systemic racism?

Methodology

This review sought to systematically identify, appraise and synthesize literature on systems leadership in education published in SCSI-listed journals. The focus of this international review and attendant review protocol was developed iteratively (Xiao & Watson, 2019) in response to initial findings which revealed a dearth of papers on systems leadership approaches to systemic racism in the education sector. The first iteration therefore served the purpose of identifying a 'gap' in the education field (Andrews, 2005). To better understand the dominant narratives which led to this gap, the application of systems leadership was tracked through education research over time with a further focus on the moral purpose of systems leadership asserted and defined by early conceptual work mentioned above in the introduction, i.e. equity and inclusion. As

stated in the introduction, a final aim was to assess the fitness of this research to address systemic racism. The three sets of search terms used align with the research questions stated above in the introduction:

(1) System(s) leadership AND education
(2) System(s) leadership AND equity AND inclusion AND education
(3) System(s) leadership AND anti-racism/anti-racist/race/race equality/racism/ ethnicity

While Shih et al. (2008) recommend searching within high-impact factor journals to reflect the status of the field, there is a danger of reinforcing existing hierarchies and silences when limiting the review in this way. Google Scholar and Scopus were chosen as search tools, the former due to its widely regarded functionality and coverage (Halevi et al., 2017); the latter to counter Google Scholars' limitations, such as its vulnerability to predatory journals (Rice et al., 2021) and prioritizing of citation counts which can reinforce dominant narratives while limiting the visibility of recent publications. Searches were concluded at 200 results, or when successive pages yielded irrelevant items. A further limitation was restriction to English-language journals, which compromises the international nature of the review.

No time frame was used to limit the selection of results, however the papers yielded by the above search terms fell between 2005 and 2023. In the first round of search and selection, the inclusion criteria were limited to focus the yield on the research questions:

(1) peer reviewed journal articles;
(2) the use of the term 'system(s) leadership' or 'system(s)' related to leadership in the text of the article; 3. relevance to *schools* in the yield for the first search term (System(s) leadership AND education).

In the second round of selection, duplicates and articles which did not have systems leadership as a clear focus in the title, abstract or key words were removed. Results for the third, anti-racism-related search terms which did not have an explicit education focus were also discounted. The remaining 32 publications (see Appendix) were then read in full to extract data addressing the research questions.

The analysis of findings is organized in two sections: one tracking the narrative of moral purpose in the 24 papers yielded by the first search term, and a second section for the second and third search terms which take apply explicitly social justice lens. The first section identifies three waves of systems leadership research, each of which intensifies critique of the perceived shift from moral purpose to managerialism. The analysis of this section is done chronologically, and considers journal distribution, type of article, dominant themes and significant divergences and/or critique of the dominant narrative through a process of discourse analysis.

It is notable that the second and third search terms focusing on equity, inclusion and anti-racism did not yield duplicates of the first search term yield. These seem not to be concepts discussed explicitly within the dominant discourses on systems leadership in education. The search term 'System(s) leadership AND equity AND inclusion AND education' yielded only three results meeting the final

inclusion criteria. The search term 'System(s) leadership AND anti-racism/anti-racist/race/race equality/racism/ethnicity' initially yielded 33 peer-reviewed papers in Google Scholar, and none in Scopus. When the final inclusion criteria narrowed these 33 results to education papers with systems leadership as a clear focus, only five papers remained. Of the eight papers in total which comprised this small subset on systems leadership and social justice, each journal included was represented once. The second subsection synthesizes findings from these remaining eight papers about how systems leadership has been applied to social justice issues in education. The extent to which this supports a systems leadership approach to tackling systemic racism in English schools is to be evaluated in the discussion and conclusion section.

Tracking the narrative of moral purpose

The search term 'System(s) leadership AND education' yielded 24 results meeting the final inclusion criteria. Three publishing 'waves' applying systems leadership to schools emerged from this subset, with significant gaps in publishing between each: 2005–2011, 2014–2016 and 2018–2023. The first wave is limited to Anglo Cluster countries and establishes the conceptual foundations for systems leadership as applied to schools; the second wave begins to balance conceptual work with empirical research, moves beyond the Anglosphere, and takes a largely critical perspective on the enactment of systems leadership in schools; the third wave is characterized by a dramatic increase in both empirical research and national diversity of authorship with an overarching theme of power dynamics.

Education Management Administration and Leadership was the most dominant journal overall with six papers in the years 2016–2023. *School Leadership and Management* came second with four papers between 2007 and 2021, and *Management in Education* came third with three papers published between 2008 and 2021. All other journals were represented once.

Type of Article
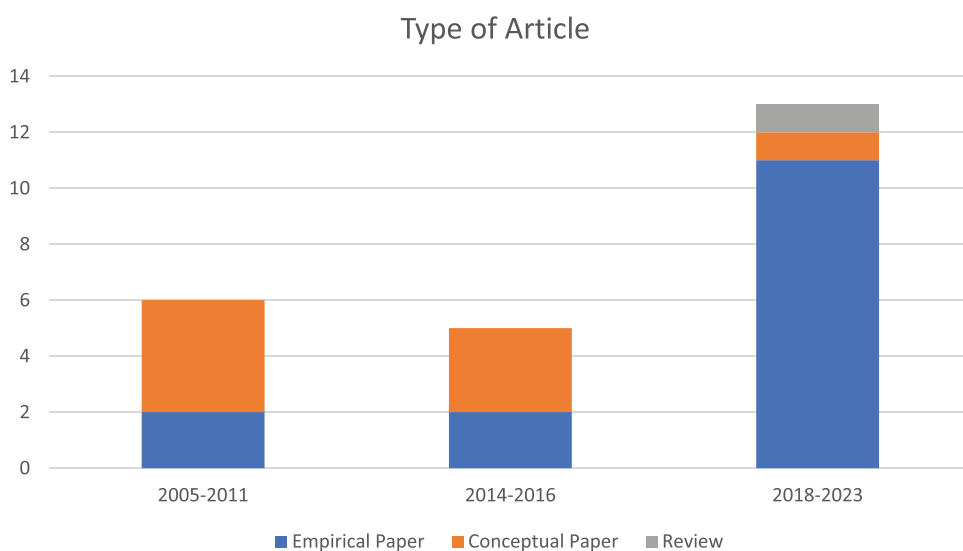
Wave I

The first conceptual paper 'School Leadership and System Leadership' champions the UK government funded National College of School Leaders (NCSL) to advance school effectiveness and improvement via systems leadership (Southworth & Quesnay, 2005). In terms of equity and inclusion, the paper advocates 'personalised forms of learning' in which there is 'more attention given to student perspectives and voices' and equity is no longer seen in opposition to excellence (219). This aim seems to be in line with Hopkins, Collarbone and West-Burnham's definition of moral purpose as it proposes empowering student voice and working with diverse perspectives in the face of exclusionary standards; however, there is a shift in ownership: rather than centering those in positional authority, student agency is prioritized for the purpose of greater equity. While Southworth and Quesnay offer a means of shifting from the moral purpose of hierarchical leadership to a more 'ground up' social justice approach, they do not consider the agency of teachers in this process despite their central role in the proposed systems change.

In the following conceptual papers, exclusionary power dynamics is a more dominant theme than the explicit discussion of moral purpose, although one could argue that they are wedded by the concepts of equity and inclusion. Hatcher (2008) critically challenges the business leadership models of multi-academy trusts (MATs) which had begun to replace local education authorities (LEAs). The power structures of 'systems leadership' are interrogated: does systems leadership entail the top-down implementation of government policy through executive MAT leaders or the agency of teachers as co-formulators of policy? Hatcher argues that executive heads of academy trusts are positioned more as technocratic managers than systems leaders. Hartley's conceptual paper in 2010 directly challenges the form of systems leadership applied to English schools as one which employs hierarchical bureaucracy to control rather than collaboration with stakeholders.

Hopkins and Higham author both empirical papers in this first wave, addressing power dynamics and moral purpose (2007). The paper published in the UK-based

journal *School Leadership and Management*, is a mapping exercise focused on effectiveness, improvement and power structures: incentives vs legislation and balancing the agency of headteachers with effective executive leadership at MAT level (Hopkins & Higham, 2007). The second, published in the *Australian Journal of Education*, synthesizes 'bottom-up' systems leadership and moral purpose by proposing that self-managed schools can mobilize expertise and capacity at the ground level to take joint responsibility for social equity (Higham & Hopkins, 2007).

Wave II

The first paper of the second wave to explicitly address moral purpose also comes from outside of the UK, but from a vantage point beyond the Global North/**Anglo Cluster**. This 2014 paper by Toh et al. reaches beyond systems leadership to discuss *ecological* leaders who embody moral purpose in the form of East-Asian collectivist beliefs. Toh et al. critique the Global North preoccupation with the 'top-down' vs 'bottom-up' debate, and silence about multi-tiered, interfacing and ecological subsystems, e.g. teachers who collaborate with each other within and across schools alongside a formal hierarchy. They describe how socio-cultural values inform and sustain an ecological approach to school leadership, situating their work alongside David Hargreaves' 'collective moral purpose' (D. H. Hargreaves, 2012), though their own conceptualization of moral purpose is not articulated beyond 'innovation' and creating opportunities for success (848).

Simon (2015) provides a striking foil for Toh et al'.s model, critiquing systems leadership in the England as a means of facilitating the marketization of schools. She exemplifies the subversion of systems theory with terms such as 'predatory partnership' and 'collaborative thuggery' and argues that systems leadership in the UK policy context is for social regulation rather than radical change. Boylan (2016) seeks to address this subversion, positioning teachers as systems leaders with an activist professional identity, working for a moral purpose. Boylan develops this further in 2018 with findings that show teachers acting as systems leaders to mobilize, broker and create networks that act on local and systems-wide concerns. Boylan describes this as 'professional development activism', providing a vision for how systems leadership could enable radical change.

Wave III

Kamp's paper (2018) begins the third wave of this dataset alongside Boylan and develops the critical discourse on systems leadership using concepts from Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT considers the influence of non-human and unreal actors, such as governance models and intentions, which Kamp argues may advance or frustrate the collective task of supporting young people through the education-employment transition. The moral purpose of this collective task is underlined by presenting the English and Australian contexts as risk societies where young people must navigate erratic pathways into sustainable employment. Kamp is the first author of this dataset to discuss 'wicked' social problems – those responsible for risk and erratic pathways – as a rationale for using and adapting systems leadership in education.

Several papers in this third wave concern the power dynamics of systems change, rather than an explicit moral purpose (Dudley et al., 2020; Eddy-Spicer et al., 2021; Harris

et al., 2021; James et al., 2021; Poultney & Anderson, 2021; Qian et al., 2023; Tsakeni et al., 2021). Cousin (2019) discusses the same theme, but with explicit discussion of how moral purpose is sacrificed for income generation in English schools:

> The empirical examples from this study, combined with those of Robinson (2012) and Coldron et al. (2014), illustrate the accuracy of Ball's assessment that the new policy paradigm constitutes 'a new moral environment' within which schools are being 'inducted into a culture of self-interest manifested in terms of survivalism' (Ball, 2008, p. 45). This shift of orientation, towards the internal wellbeing of the institution and away from more general social issues within the community, risks the neglect of the most vulnerable students, since it introduces new orientations and value systems to which social justice issues seem peripheral. (Ball, 2008; Glatter, 2017,p. 534)

Courtney and McGinity (2022) argues that systems leadership in the form of MATs operationalizes this depoliticization: 'political issues and decisions are removed from the public sphere where they may be debated. Instead, they are "presented by politicians and policymakers as matters of technical efficiency rather than normative choices" (Clarke, 2012 p. 298)'. (p. 893).

The moral purpose of systems leadership set out at the start of this paper seems to have been marginalized at this point – at least in the context of English schools. Rather than working with diversity and promoting equity and inclusion, the MAT form of systems leadership is said to be legitimizing exclusionary power dynamics. Furthermore, Innes et al. (2023) challenge Hargreaves' (2011) vision of inter-school systems leadership having a 'deeply moral base' (25) with their findings that MATs enable micro-political maneuvers for non-altruistic purposes within middle leadership.

Lin et al. (2023) write from the Chinese context and argue that the Global North's tendency to disguise management as leadership is needless. They use the metaphor of a Chinese dragon boat to conceptualize a de-colonized and collectivist vision of systems leadership. Qian et al. (2023) also write from the Chinese context and offer a collectivist vision which problematizes the binary of 'top-down' vs 'bottom-up' debate. They describe how top-down systems create the enabling conditions for teachers to leverage their expertise as systems leaders, extending expertise through teacher learning communities. Apart from 'continuous system improvement' and knowledge sharing, the purpose of these communities is not discussed. However, the discussion of tensions between hierarchical power structures and teachers' work at the periphery suggests that moral purpose is contested.

Systems leadership and social justice in education research

The only author represented more than once in this subset of eight papers published two conceptual papers (Mowat, 2018, 2019) about moral purpose and equity in systems leadership for education. Mowat's (2018) paper argues that we must look beyond the limited scope of attainment outcomes and take a holistic approach which considers economic, social and relational barriers affecting families in poverty. The complex nature of the root problems behind the attainment gap suggests 'wickedity' as defined above in the introduction. To help schools make sense of the myriad problems and priorities they are trying to address, Mowat suggests a systems level approach which includes clearer direction from the Scottish government and HEI support. Her 2019 paper develops on
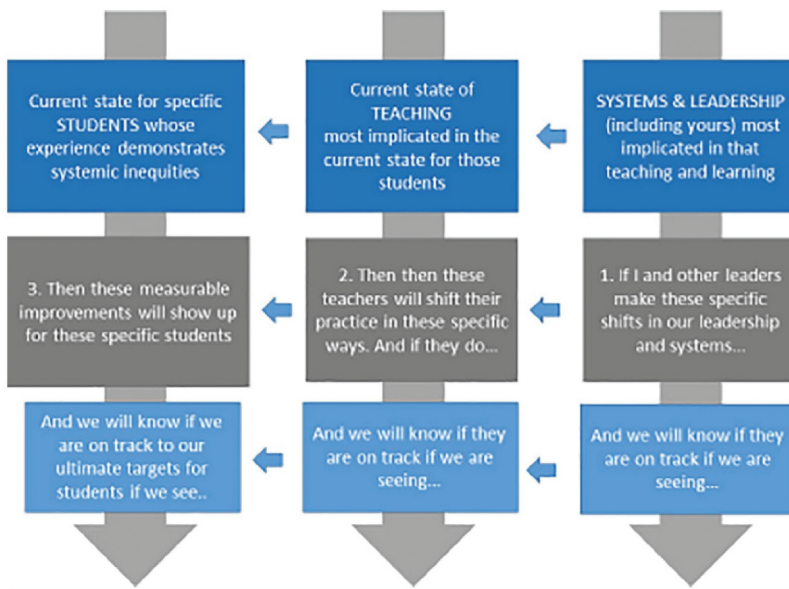
Figure 1. Honig and Honsa's CRT cycle-of-inquiry approach (2020).

this argument, calling for an improved support infrastructure around schools to help families overcome barriers like mental health and communication difficulties. To develop her argument for a systems-level approach, Mowat cites Bates (2013) and Parker (1997) to critique reductionist, technical-rationalist fixations on abstract standards which prioritize 'top-down' managerialism, thereby cutting teachers, families and support organizations out of the planning process. Fuller (2012) is cited to refocus the moral purpose of systems leadership in education: an 'emancipatory intent' with which headteachers engage their entire community in identifying and celebrating diversity, to promote respectful relationships with all.

Others offer more formalized solutions. Rigby et al. (2019) empirical research paper finds that systems leaders need an equity framework to counter disparities, taking account of actions and culture, ensuring practitioner-scholar participation and using an iterative approach. Honig and Honsa's CRT cycle-of-inquiry framework (2020) attends to most of these criteria: it addresses racism in individual actions and school culture, the role of school leaders, teachers and students, and includes an impact assessment to inform an iterative process. Systems leadership is integrated with CRT to generate the framework in Figue 1 below.

Greig et al. (2021) research paper also integrates systems leadership into an existing model, using it alongside trauma-informed leadership to account for compounding systemic concerns: intergenerational poverty, racism, childhood trauma and long-standing educational inequity, as well as community devastation from natural events. Here again, we see markers of 'wickedity' requiring a systems-aware approach.

Concrete means of enacting the nonhierarchical, collaborative systems change described by Mowat, Rigby et al., and Honig is exemplified by Arar and Taysum. Their 2020 research paper employs a comparative analysis of two high-school principals: one in the Arab education system in Israel and the other in England. They found

that when these principals transformed hierarchical leadership into distributed leadership using whole school inquiry, this led to collective accountability and knowledge exchange across diverse communities. Academics worked with the principals and their staff to formulate action research through which staff and young people were collectively empowered to address status gaps, improve equity and raise attainment.

Ryan and Watson (2021) also envision a nonhierarchical approach to systems change in their American HEI. They analyzed 120 EdD Education Leadership dissertations to find a clear shift in focus toward social and climate justice, prompting their faculty to conceptualize a new model of systemic transformation in education. Acknowledging the will to activism among their students, they envision a pivot from change agent to change coalition, building the capacity of graduates to engage with the communities most affected by systemic injustices and generate solutions.

The use of positional authority to flatten hierarchies and enact equitable systems change is complicated by race and gender identity in Ishimaru, Irby and Green's research (2023). This paper from a U.S. context challenges the assumption that equity leadership positions and policies are sufficient means for tackling the organizational dynamics of oppression:

> . . . equity directors who identified as Black and other women of color often experienced constraints to their agency, unequal distribution of resources, differential return to their credentials, and racialized decoupling of formal rules from practice that resulted in a sense of 'racial battle fatigue'. (Arnold et al., 2016; Smith & Tracey, 2016)

Although in formalized processes their identity functioned as a 'negative credential', these equity directors also recounted how their use of race-gendered experiential knowledge informed long-term strategies and helped them reshape their role to realize more equitable system change. Their specialized knowledge and relationships with the staff and wider community allowed them to function as the 'enablers' described in Bolden et al. (2020) work, only in a school context.

Discussion and conclusions

The research questions for this review distinguished between the narrative of moral purpose, the application of systems leadership to social justice issues, and an evaluation of the fitness of systems leadership research to address systemic racism. The findings suggest that all three foci are interdependent.

Despite the centrality of social justice concerns in early writing about systems leadership in education, as reflected in narratives of 'moral purpose', further work to define or enact moral purpose seems to have been sidelined in favor of critical discussions about hierarchical managerialism. Perhaps this change of focus is warranted. Conceptual works on systems leadership cited at the beginning of this article and others (Senge, 2011; Senge et al., 2015) propose that collectivist approaches empowering a diverse range of stakeholders are a prerequisite for achieving social justice aims. If the concept of systems leadership is co-opted by hierarchical management structures to marginalize stakeholders (Close, 2016; Courtney & McGinity, 2022; Cousin, 2019; Hartley, 2010; Hatcher, 2008; James et al., 2021; Mowat, 2019; Simon, 2015), it follows that a critical reassessment should take place.

Returning to the example in the introduction, there is an argument forming in the UK health sector that systems leadership, when engaging with diverse stakeholders, can effectively respond to wicked social problems. Based on findings from critical literature in the dataset, the main barriers to achieving the moral purpose of greater equity in *school* systems are the 'wicked' nature of social problems themselves (Greig et al., 2021; Kamp, 2018; Mowat, 2018) and hierarchically imposed, technical-rationalist solutions which obscure and evade social justice issues (Courtney & McGinity, 2022; Higham & Hopkins, 2007; Mowat, 2019; Simon, 2015). In other words, social injustices are being reinforced by top-down, managerialist structures which are poorly suited to deal with complex social problems because they exclude the diverse sources of input and collaboration needed to develop mutual understandings and dynamic solutions.

The policy context informing these top-down, technical-rationalist solutions may also be at fault. Staying with our example of English schools, the current nationalist and multicultural policies in education (Department for Education, 2014) have historically dismissed issues of race in education in favor of a 'colourblind' approach (Tikly, 2022), and the dominant manifestation of systems leadership in England, i.e. MATs, 'can best be understood as a reconfiguring of state power, attempting to create new vehicles for the implementation of policy under the control of a reliable new technocratic management cadre' (Hatcher, 2008, p. 30). This does not bode well for addressing the wicked problem of systemic racism in English schools.

However, the dataset has also indicated several opportunities for reclaiming the moral purpose of equity in schools, e.g. that characteristics like race do not overshadow effort and talent when correlated to achievement. In this sense, the findings also offer an optimistic response to the second and third research questions guiding this review:

(1) How has systems leadership been applied to social justice issues in education such as equity, inclusion and systemic racism?
(2) To what extent do education research findings support a systems leadership approach to tackling systemic racism?

Firstly, the ground-level, joint responsibility for social equity endorsed by Higham and Hopkins (2007) can be achieved by employing whole-school inquiry to cultivate collective accountability and knowledge sharing across significant cultural and status divides (Arar & Taysum, 2020). This process converts 'top-down' technical-rationalist approaches into a more responsive model that accounts for complexities. Ground-level, collective agency is also found to work through teacher-networks within and beyond individual schools as part of an ecological model (Toh et al., 2014) or alongside hierarchical power structures, although these may precipitate tensions between the center and periphery (Qian et al., 2023). We can see this enacted outside of the dataset in teacher-led research on decolonizing the curriculum (Glowach et al., 2023) which seeks to address systemic racism in the English curriculum by opening up 'adaptive spaces' (Bolden et al., 2020) for collective teacher professional activism (Boylan, 2018).

Secondly, there are several routes given for attending to 'wicked' social problems. In responding specifically to risk contexts which exacerbate inequity, Kamp's (2018) work suggests greater consideration of non-human and unreal actors such as the policies mentioned above when attempting to understand

complex barriers and formulate solutions. Greig et al. (2021) offer a model for integrating systems leadership and trauma informed approaches to counter entrenched inequities such as intergenerational poverty and racism. Similarly, Mowat calls for the government to improve support networks around schools, giving CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) as a key example (2019). This is a particularly relevant strategy for addressing systemic racism considering current mental health disparities between ethnicities in the UK (Mind, 2024).

Finally, Honig and Honsa's (2020) CRT cycle-of-inquiry framework has the potential to synthesize the recommendations above while focusing them directly on the issue of systemic racism in schools. In line with Senge et al.'s (2015) renewed conceptualization of systems leadership which stipulates personal reflection and accountability *first*, their model starts with an acknowledgment of complicity before taking steps to address racism. Hierarchical leadership is replaced with managerial accountability, student voice and teacher agency within an iterative process responsive to complexity. If the experiential knowledge of racially minoritised staff and students can be mobilized through this framework while shielding them from 'race battle fatigue' (Ishimaru et al., 2023), then equitable outcomes could be further realized.

The above findings and recommendations build on the recent review by Harris et al. (2021) by considering the moral dimension of social justice in systems leadership in addition to structural and procedural dimensions. Limiting this review to papers which *explicitly* employ the concept of systems leadership undoubtably excludes many studies which could be classified as systems leadership research in nature if not in name. However, by employing this constraint, the author seeks to reclaim and renew the moral purpose of systems leadership in education research to address specific and entrenched social injustices in the school system such as systemic racism. With systems leadership models being used to tackle 'wicked' problems and achieve greater social justice worldwide (Dreier et al., 2019), the potential for applying and developing similar models in education looks promising.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Terra Glowach is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Childhood at the University of the West of England in Bristol, UK. She is a Programme Lead in Initial Teacher Education, a Module Lead for the MA in Education Leadership and has published on teacher-led approaches to decolonial praxis, and de-siloing social and environmental justice education.

ORCID

Terra Glowach http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0909-3795

References

Alexander, C., Weekes-Bernard, D., & Arday, J. (2015, August). *The school report: Race, education and inequality in contemporary Britain.*

Andrews, R. (2005). The place of systematic reviews in education research. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *53*(4), 399–416. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2005.00303.x

Appels, L., De Maeyer, S., Faddar, J., & Van Petegem, P. (2023). Unpacking equity. Educational equity in secondary analyses of international large-scale assessments: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, *38*, 100494. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2022.100494

Arar, K., & Taysum, A. (2020). From hierarchical leadership to a mark of distributed leadership by whole school inquiry in partnership with higher education institutions: Comparing the Arab education in Israel with the education system in England. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *23*(6), 755–774. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1591513

Arnold, N. W., Crawford, E. R., & Khalifa, M. (2016). Psychological heuristics and faculty of color: Racial battle fatigue and tenure/promotion. *Journal of Higher Education*, *87*(6), 890–919. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.11780891

Ball, S. J. (2008). *The education debate.* Policy Press.

Bates, A. (2013). Transcending systems thinking in education reform: Implications for policy-makers and school leaders. *Journal of Education Policy*, *28*(1), 38–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2012.684249

Bei, Z., Knowler, H., & Butt, J. (2021). How do we progress racial justice in education?.

Bell, D. (1987). *And we are not saved: The elusive quest for racial justice.* Basic Books.

Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism.* Basic Books.

Bolden, R., Gulati, A., & Edwards, G. (2020). Mobilizing change in public services: Insights from a systems leadership development intervention. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *43*(1), 26–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2019.1604748

Bore, A., & Wright, N. (2009). The wicked and complex in education: Developing a transdisciplinary perspective for policy formulation, implementation and professional practice. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *35*(3), 241–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607470903091286

Boylan, M. (2016). Deepening system leadership: Teachers leading from below. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *44*(1), 57–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213501314

Boylan, M. (2018). Enabling adaptive system leadership: Teachers leading professional development. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *46*(1), 86–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216628531

Brooks, J. S., & Watson, T. N. (2019). School leadership and racism: An ecological perspective. *Urban Education*, *54*(5), 631–655. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918783821

Came, H., & Griffith, D. (2018). Tackling racism as a "wicked" public health problem: Enabling allies in anti-racism praxis. *Social Science & Medicine*, *199*, 181–188. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.03.028

Clarke, M. (2012). The (absent) politics of neo-liberal education policy. *Critical Studies in Education*, *53*(3), 297–310.

Close, P. (2016). 'System leader' consultancy development in English schools: A long-term agenda for a democratic future? *School Leadership and Management*, *36*(1), 113–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2016.1160214

Collarbone, P., & West-Burnham, J. (2008). *Understanding systems leadership: Securing excellence and equity in education.* AC Black.

Courtney, S. J., & McGinity, R. (2022). System leadership as depoliticisation: Reconceptualising educational leadership in a new multi-academy trust. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *50*(6), 893–910. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220962101

Cousin, S. (2019). System leaders in England: Leaders of a profession, or instruments of government? *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *47*(4), 520–537. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217751726

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (Eds.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement*. New Press.

Cushing, I. (2023). Challenging anti-Black linguistic racism in schools amidst the 'what works' agenda. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 26(3), 257–276. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2023.2170435

Demie, F. (2021). The experience of black Caribbean pupils in school exclusion in England. *Educational Review*, 73(1), 55–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1590316

Department for Education. (2014). *Guidance on promoting British values in schools published*. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guidance-on-promoting-british-values-in-schools-published

Department for Education. (2023). *School teacher workforce*. Retrieved April 4, 2024, from https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest/#full-page-history

Dreier, L., Nabarro, D., & Nelson, J. (2019). *Systems leadership for sustainable development: Strategies for achieving systemic change*. Harvard Kennedy School.

Dudley, P., Pratt, M., Gilbert, C., Abbey, J., Lang, J., & Bruckdorfer, H. (2020). Cross-school 'close-to-practice' action research, system leadership and local civic partnership re-engineering an inner-city learning community. *London Review of Education*, 18(3), 390–407. https://doi.org/10.14324/lre.18.3.05

Eddy-Spicer, D., Arce-Trigatti, P., & Young, M. D. (2021). Field building through strategic bricolage: System leadership and the institutionalizing role of intermediary organizations. *Journal of Professional Capital & Community*, 6(1), 29–43. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-11-2019-0032

Elliott, V., Nelson-Addy, L., Chantiluke, R., & Courtney, M. (2021). Lit in colour: Diversity in literature in English schools. *Lit in Colour Penguin*. https://litincolour.penguin.co.uk

Fullan, M. (2004). Leadership across the system. *Insight (British Journal of NDT)*, 61(04), 14–17.

Fuller, K. (2012). Leading with emancipatory intent: Headteachers' approaches to pupil diversity. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 40(6), 672–689. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212456911

Gamble, J., & McCallum, R. (2022). *Local child safeguarding practice review: Child Q*. City & Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership.

Glatter, R. (2017). Because we can': Pluralism and structural reform in education. *London Review of Education*, 15(1), 115–125.

Glowach, T., Mitchell, R., Bennett, T., Donaldson, L., Jefferson, J., Panford, L., Saleh, A., Smee, K., Wells-Dion, B., & Hemmings, E. (2023). Making spaces for collaborative action and learning: Reflections on teacher-led decolonising initiatives from a professional learning network in England. *The Curriculum Journal*, 34(1), 100–117. https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.186

Greig, J., Bailey, B., Abbott, L., & Brunzell, T. (2021). Trauma-informed integral leadership: Leading school communities with a systems-aware approach. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 17(1), 62–97.

Halevi, G., Moed, H., & Bar-Ilan, J. (2017). Suitability of Google Scholar as a source of scientific information and as a source of data for scientific evaluation—review of the literature. *Journal of Informetrics*, 11(3), 823–834. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2017.06.005

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable leadership*. Jossey-Bass/Wiley.

Hargreaves, D. (2007). *The true meaning of system leadership*. Presentation at National College for School Leadership.

Hargreaves, D. H. (2011). *Leading a self-improving school system*. National College for School Leadership.

Hargreaves, D. H. (2012). *A self-improving school system: Towards maturity*. National College for School Leadership.

Harris, A., Jones, M., & Hashim, N. (2021). System leaders and system leadership: Exploring the contemporary evidence base. *School Leadership and Management*, 41(4–5), 387–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2021.1889492

Hartley, D. (2010). The management of education and the social theory of the firm: From distributed leadership to collaborative community. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, *42*(4), 345–361. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2010.492958

Hatcher, R. (2008). System leadership, networks and the question of power. *Management in Education*, *22*(2), 24–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020608088801

Higham, R., & Hopkins, D. (2007). System leadership for educational renewal in England: The case of federations and executive heads. *Australian Journal of Education*, *51*(3), 299–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494410705100307

Honig, M. I., & Honsa, A. (2020). Systems-focused equity leadership learning: Shifting practice through practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *15*(3), 192–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775120936303

Hopkins, D. (2009). *The emergence of system* leadership. NCSL.

Hopkins, D., & Higham, R. (2007). System leadership: Mapping the landscape. *School Leadership and Management*, *27*(2), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701237289

Hordern, J., & Brooks, C. (2023). The core content framework and the 'new science' of educational research. *Oxford Review of Education*, *49*(6), 800–818.

Innes, M., Armstrong, P., & Courtney, S. (2023). Centring micro-politics in system leadership in a multi-academy trust. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 17411432231210972. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231210972

Ishimaru, A. M., Irby, D. J., & Green, T. (2023). The paradox of organizational double jeopardy: PK-12 equity directors in racialized and gendered educational systems. *Urban Review*, *55*(3), 364–392. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-022-00653-2

James, D. M., Wicker, K., Street, M., Bibby, R. J., & Robinson, J. (2021). Systems leadership in the early years. *Management in Education*, *38*(3), 99–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/08920206211031913

Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020, June). *Race and racism in secondary schools*. *Report*. Runnymede.

Kamp, A. (2018). Assembling the actors: Exploring the challenges of 'system leadership' in education through actor-network theory. *Journal of Education Policy*, *33*(6), 778–792.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, *97*(1), 47–68.

Lin, P., Courtney, S. J., Heffernan, A., & Armstrong, P. (2023). System leadership in China? Conceptualising "education collectives" as formal school partnerships through the dragon boat metaphor. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *122*, 102268. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102268

Mind. (2024). *Facts and figures about racism and mental health*. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-strategy/becoming-a-truly-anti-racist-organisation/facts-and-figures-about-racism-and-mental-health/

Mowat, J. G. (2018). Closing the attainment gap – a realistic proposition or an elusive pipe-dream? *Journal of Education Policy*, *33*(2), 299–321. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1352033

Mowat, J. G. (2019). 'Closing the gap': Systems leadership is no leadership at all without a moral compass – a Scottish perspective. *School Leadership and Management*, *39*(1), 48–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1447457

NEU. (2021). *Racism excludes: Why schools need to make the difference*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from https://neu.org.uk/latest/library/racism-excludes-why-schools-need-make-difference

Parker, S. (1997). *Reflective teaching in the postmodern world: A manifesto for education in postmodernity*. Open University Press.

Poultney, V. A., & Anderson, D. B. (2021). Leading change for survival: The rural flexi-school approach. *Management in Education*, *35*(4), 182–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020619878809

Qian, H., Walker, A., & Zheng, Y. (2023). Boundary-spanning practices of system leaders in China: Enabling conditions and inherent tensions. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *53*(2), 238–257. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231174690

Rice, D. B., Skidmore, B., & Cobey, K. D. (2021). Dealing with predatory journal articles captured in systematic reviews. *Systematic Reviews*, *10*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-021-01733-2

Rigby, J., Donaldson Walsh, E., Boten, S., Deno, A., Harrison, M. S., Merrell, R., Pritchett, S., & Seaman, S. (2019). A view from the field: The process of improving equitable systems leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *57*(5), 484–500. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-09-2018-0181

Rittel, H. W. J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, *4*(2), 155–169. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730

Ryan, A. M., & Watson, S. (2021). Impact and inclusion: Transforming an EdD program into a crucible for systems change. *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, *6*(1), 11–16. https://doi.org/10.5195/ie.2021.123

Senge, P. (2011). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. Doubleday.

Senge, P., Hamilton, H., & Kania, J. (2015). The dawn of system leadership. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *13*(1), 27–33.

Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2014). Systems school leadership: Exploring an emerging construct. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *52*(6), 792–811. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-07-2013-0081

Shih, M., Feng, J., & Tsai, C. C. (2008). Research and trends in the field of e-learning from 2001 to 2005: A content analysis of cognitive studies in selected journals. *Computers & Education*, *51*(2), 955–967. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2007.10.004

Siddique, H. (2020). *Black working-class students unfairly excluded in England, thinktank warns. The Guardian*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/28/black-working-class-pupils-unfairly-excluded-in-england-thinktank-warns

Simon, C. A. (2015). Are two heads better than one? System school leadership explained and critiqued. *School Leadership and Management*, *35*(5), 544–558. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2015.1107035

Smith, W. K., & Tracey, P. (2016). Institutional complexity and paradox theory: Complementarities of competing demands. *Strategic Organization*, *14*(4), 455–466. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476127016638565

Southgate, E., Reynolds, R., & Howley, P. (2013). Professional experience as a wicked problem in initial teacher education. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, *31*, 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.11.005

Southworth, G., & Quesnay, H. D. (2005, June). School leadership and system leadership. *The Educational Forum*, *69*(2), 212–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720508984685

Tikly, L. (2022). Racial formation and education: A critical analysis of the Sewell report. *Ethnicities*, *22*(6), 857–881. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968211061882

Toh, Y., Jamaludin, A., Hung, W. L. D., & Chua, P. M. H. (2014). Ecological leadership: Going beyond system leadership for diffusing school-based innovations in the crucible of change for 21st century learning. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, *23*(4), 835–850. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-014-0211-4

Tsakeni, M., Munje, P., & Jita, L. (2021). Issues and challenges influencing school improvement opportunities for science and mathematics. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*, *16*(3), 1300–1318. https://doi.org/10.18844/cjes.v16i3.5853

Vaught, S. E., & Castagno, A. E. (2008). I don't think I'm a racist: Critical race theory, teacher attitudes, and structural racism. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *11*(2), 95–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320802110217

Xiao, Y., & Watson, M. (2019). Guidance on conducting a systematic literature review. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, *39*(1), 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X17723971

Appendix: *Works included in final data set*

Arar, K. and Taysum, A. (2020). From hierarchical leadership to a mark of distributed leadership by whole school inquiry in partnership with Higher Education Institutions: comparing the Arab

education in Israel with the education system in England. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *23*(6), pp.755-774.

Boylan, M. (2016). Deepening system leadership: Teachers leading from below. *Educational management administration & leadership*, 44(1), pp.57-72.

Boylan, M. (2018). Enabling adaptive system leadership: Teachers leading professional development. *Educational management administration & leadership*, 46(1), pp.86-106.

Close, P. (2016). 'System leader' consultancy development in English schools: a long-term agenda for a democratic future? *School Leadership & Management*, *36*(1), pp.113-132.

Courtney, S.J. and McGinity, R. (2022). System leadership as depoliticisation: Reconceptualising educational leadership in a new multi-academy trust. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(6), pp.893-910.

Cousin, S. (2019). System leaders in England: Leaders of a profession, or instruments of government?. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(4), pp.520-537.

Dudley, P. et al. (2020). 'Cross-school "close-to-practice" action research, system leadership and local civic partnership re-engineering an inner-city learning community', *London Review of Education*, 18. doi:10.14324/lre.18.3.05.

Eddy-Spicer, D., Arce-Trigatti, P. and Young, M.D. (2021). Field building through strategic bricolage: system leadership and the institutionalizing role of intermediary organizations. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *6*(1), pp.29-43.

Fullan, M. and Knight, J. (2011). Coaches as system leaders. *Educational leadership*, 69(2), pp.50-53.

Greig, J., Bailey, B., Abbott, L. and Brunzell, T. (2021). Trauma-Informed Integral Leadership: Leading School Communities with a Systems-Aware Approach. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, *17*(1), pp.62-97.

Harris, A., Jones, M. and Hashim, N. (2021). System leaders and system leadership: Exploring the contemporary evidence base. *School Leadership & Management*, 41(4-5), pp.387-408.

Hartley, D. (2010). The management of education and the social theory of the firm: From distributed leadership to collaborative community. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, *42*(4), pp.345-361.

Hatcher, R. (2008). System leadership, networks and the question of power. *Management in Education*, *22*(2), pp.24-30.

Higham, R. and Hopkins, D. (2007b). System leadership for educational renewal in England: The case of federations and executive heads. *Australian Journal of Education*, *51*(3), pp.299-314.

Honig, M.I. and Honsa, A. (2020). Systems-focused equity leadership learning: Shifting practice through practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *15*(3), pp.192-209.

Hopkins, D. and Higham, R. (2007a). System leadership: mapping the landscape. *School leadership and management*, 27(2), pp.147-166.

Innes, M., Armstrong, P. and Courtney, S. (2023). Centring micro-politics in system leadership in a multi-academy trust. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, p.17411432231210972.

Ishimaru, A.M., Irby, D.J. and Green, T. (2023). The paradox of organizational double jeopardy: PK-12 equity directors in racialized and gendered educational systems. *The Urban Review*, *55* (3), pp.364-392.

James, D.M., Wicker, K., Street, M., Bibby, R.J. and Robinson, J. (2021). Systems leadership in the early years. *Management in Education*, p.08920206211031913.

Kamp, A. (2018). Assembling the actors: exploring the challenges of 'system leadership' in education through Actor-Network Theory. *Journal of Education Policy*, *33*(6), pp.778-792.

Lin, P., Courtney, S.J., Heffernan, A. and Armstrong, P. (2023). System leadership in China? Conceptualising "Education Collectives" as formal school partnerships through the dragon boat metaphor. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *122*, p.102268.

Mowat, J.G. (2018). Closing the attainment gap–a realistic proposition or an elusive pipe-dream?. *Journal of Education Policy*, *33*(2), pp.299-321.

Mowat, J.G. (2019). 'Closing the gap': systems leadership is no leadership at all without a moral compass–a Scottish perspective. *School Leadership & Management*, *39*(1), pp.48-75.

Poultney, V.A. and Anderson, D.B. (2021). Leading change for survival: The rural flexi-school approach. *Management in Education*, *35*(4), pp.182-188.

Qian, H., Walker, A. and Zheng, Y. (2023). Boundary-spanning practices of system leaders in China: Enabling conditions and inherent tensions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, p.17411432231174690.

Rigby, J., Donaldson Walsh, E., Boten, S., Deno, A., Harrison, M.S., Merrell, R., Pritchett, S. and Seaman, S. (2019). A view from the field: The process of improving equitable systems leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *57*(5), pp.484-500.

Ryan, A.M. and Watson, S. (2021). Impact and Inclusion: Transforming an EdD Program into a Crucible for Systems Change. *Impacting Education: Journal on Transforming Professional Practice*, *6*(1), pp.11-16.

Simon, C.A. (2015). Are two heads better than one? System school leadership explained and critiqued. *School Leadership & Management*, *35*(5), pp.544-558.

Shaked, H. and Schechter, C. (2014). Systems school leadership: Exploring an emerging construct. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 52(6), pp.792-811.

Southworth, G. and Quesnay, H.D. (2005). June. School leadership and system leadership. In *The educational forum* (Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 212-220). Taylor & Francis Group.

Toh, Y., Jamaludin, A., Hung, W.L.D. and Chua, P.M.H. (2014). Ecological leadership: Going beyond system leadership for diffusing school-based innovations in the crucible of change for 21st century learning. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23, pp.835-850.

Tsakeni, M., Munje, P. and Jita, L. (2021). Issues and Challenges Influencing School Improvement Opportunities for Science and Mathematics. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*, *16*(3), pp.1300-1318.