

2026

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Maria O'Connor

Texas Christian University maria.oconnor@tcu.edu

Recommended Citation:

O'Connor, Maria. (2026). Between the walls and the world: Competing influences on school leadership. *Midwest Journal of Education*, 3(2), 91-99. <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.7>

Connecting Theory to Practice

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Midwest Journal of Education

91-99

Volume 3, Issue 2, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.2.7><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Maria O'Connor****Abstract**

This article examines internal and external pressures faced by school leaders through a scholarly synthesis of literature combined with personal professional experiences. Findings discuss factors within schools such as pervasive deficit mindsets and interwoven social networks that impact student identity and organizational culture. External factors include historic and systemic inequities, political influences, and community engagement. The discussion centers a need for active citizenship and professional advocacy as a school leader with personal examples from the author's experience working within schools. Ultimately, effective leadership requires a connection between the "walls" of the school and the "world" of the community, bridged through intentional actions of the school leader.

Keywords

Equity Leadership; School and Community; School Leadership; School Networks

Corresponding Author:

Maria O'Connor, Doctoral Student

Texas Christian University

Email: maria.oconnor@tcu.edu

ORCID: 0009-0009-5429-7958

Introduction

The work of a school leader involves a complex navigation of the competing factors between the walls of the institution (within) and the world outside of schools. Internal factors include the mindsets and relationships that impact the school while external factors include the historical background of the school community and social/political pressures. Furthermore, the article acknowledges ways school leaders may navigate and respond to such factors, regardless of how overt (or covert) their influence may be. Scholarly resources and personal experiences working within Texas public schools frame the discussion to explore how leaders can better serve their school communities.

Methods

This paper was approached as a scholarly synthesis rather than an empirical study. Through this synthesis, real-world examples provide a frame for academic discussions. The literature included in this study provides snapshots of school leadership, particularly regarding schools as part of a community context. In addition to academic sources, other media, such as news articles, are incorporated to further provide context of real-world conflicts practitioners face. Beyond the literature, my own experiences serve to connect the dots between research and practice. As such, the results section below will be informed by the synthesis of the literature, while the discussion section will be guided by personal experiences and applications.

Theoretical Framework

To encapsulate the challenges facing school leaders both within and outside of the school building, two complementary frameworks are utilized to examine power dynamics that impact schools: social networks in schools (Deal et al., 2009) and organizational behavior frames (Bolman & Deal, 2021). When first coming into a school as a new leader, a principal may view themselves as the *de facto* leader with an expectation of respect (Deal et al., 2009). However, different levels of social and institutional power dynamics may disrupt that expectation. Bolman and Deal (2021) outline four organizational frames that impact institutions: Political, Human Resources, Structural, and Symbolic. The political frame relates to conflict and competition as it guides an organization; the human resource frame refers to relationships, skills, and the human elements of an organization. The structural frame examines the roles and policies that are in place; and the symbolic frame covers traditions and culture of an organization.

Additionally, Deal, Purington, and Waetjen (2009) outline four types of players present in social networks in schools: stars, bridges, bottlenecks, and isolates (p. 19). These different players each contribute to the social culture of a school in various ways. For example, while isolates may not directly interact with as many individuals as stars, they can still impact the flow of information, professional communication, and community learning. Knowing in advance who may help or hinder implementation of a new initiative can help a school leader be intentional about their planning process.

In examining successful business managers, Deal et al. (2009) found “the very successful managers spent almost half their time on networking, attending to the political and cultural aspects of their operations” (p. 2). This suggests that to navigate these systemic and interpersonal dynamics successfully, leaders must map out the networks through observations and conversations with key players (Deal et al., 2009). However, leaders must also employ a perspective that steps out of the inner workings of the organization to scrutinize how the organizational frames impact decision-making, beliefs, and culture on the campus (Bolman & Deal,

2021). Only through considering both these small-scale and large-scale networks can a leader understand the (often competing) pressures.

Results

Community Context

While a leader must focus on the internal pressure of the school or district, understanding the context of the larger community is also vital. Within this context, there are historical and systemic factors, broader societal beliefs, and the way that the community and school are engaged with each other.

Deficit Mindsets

The deficit mindsets in a school ascribe negative traits to students or families based on their identities. Some of these deficit mindsets surface through the continued use of curriculum that erases student identities in favor of a White perspective (Brown & Au, 2014; Radd et al., 2021; Watkins, 2007). As curriculum scholars, Brown and Au observed “the predominance of whiteness at the center of the narrative arc of the foundations of curriculum studies” (p. 360), while Watkins highlighted how it had historically been White individuals guiding and instituting changes impacting Black students, even through corporate philanthropic institutions such as those run by the Phelps Stokes or Rockefeller families (Watkins, 2007, Ch. 5, 7).

These mindsets are also apparent in the way that some educators discuss or treat students or families. Chhuon (2014) questioned “How were Cambodian male youth talked about by adults and students at CHS [the school site being studied]? Also, how did Cambodian male youth interpret these messages?” (p. 238) and found that the male students in their study were “commonly perceived through a pervasive discourse of the Cambodian dropout, troublemaker, and gangster” (p. 233) based on their clothing choices. This perception led to internalized negative reflections in the students, where some students took this as motivation to “prov[e] them wrong” (p. 243) and others accepted almost a self-defeating attitude, expressing “If the people around us treat us that way [ghetto] then that’s how we’re going to be” (p. 243). Factors outside of the school influenced the students and overall culture inside the school.

At the district level, Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) discussed how the school districts in their study “tended to promote more generalized equity calls... without explicit connections to addressing systemic forms of racism” (p. 305). By promoting a color-evasive mindset about equity, the districts ignore the deficit ideologies present. This falls into what Briscoe et al. (2009) warned about, quoting one participant who said, “We participate in our own oppression by using language that supports a way of framing the world that is inherently going to lead to inequity” (p. 3). They argue that even unintentional dialogue can reinforce inequitable hierarchies that are present in schools. It is incumbent upon the school leader to recognize these deficit mindsets, whether they are vocalized or internalized, and shift the narrative.

Historical/Systemic Context

Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) utilized Tara Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to discuss ways that Latinx school administrators utilize counterstories to push back against inequities in their school communities. Within this framework, Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) acknowledge “Three key tenets inform our analysis: the centrality of racism and intersectionality and other forms of oppression, importance of counternarrative, and historical context” (p. 294). The leaders in their study

examined how the system was built to perpetuate inequity and created visions for equity that were at times “distinctly different” (p. 290) than what was proposed by their school districts. By tapping into the wealth of their school communities, the leaders were able to go beyond the support they were institutionally offered.

In her book, *Eugenics and Education in America*, Winfield (2007) claimed that “from the very beginning, education was a conduit for training and advocacy rather than an environment of discovery and learning” (p. 152) and lays out ways that various populations of students are “Othered” (p. 5) based on a eugenicist frame of education that aims to push out undesirable traits, not just from schools, but from society itself. In an ethnographic study of a modern vocational school, Nguyen (2018) highlighted aspects of the school, such as tracking, matching students to unskilled, “low-level” (p. 845) jobs, and a desire for social betterment, that are reminiscent of the early Progressive movements described by Winfield. A school leader must be aware not only of the history of eugenicist and racist social movements but also of how those movements are still present and impacting schools in today’s society.

Societal Impacts

Broader societal factors, such as systemic racism and the belief that public schools are inferior, also breach the school’s walls and impact the job of the school leader. Khalifa’s (2012) study highlighted how a principal becoming involved in community issues, such as a racially driven incident at a local pool (p. 452), can lead to (re)building community trust. This idea of belonging with the community mirrors the decolonial thoughts espoused by Trout (2024), who spoke about a “bundle of responsibilities” instead of a “bundle of rights” (p. 151). When Black youth, who were not students at the specific principal’s school in Khalifa’s (2012) study, were victims of civil rights violations based on the color of their skin, it impacted the trust that the parents had in the authority figures of the community. However, the principal went to bat for the students and advocated for issues important to the community, “which translated into support of [the principal’s] administrative behaviors in the school” (Khalifa, 2012, p. 453). Stepping outside of the school walls led to more support within.

Beyond the quiet systemic undercurrents, there are also louder societal voices that are quick to share the belief that public schools are inferior or need to be reformed. Saltman (2007) described attempts to undermine public education in the media with “the use of such assaults to justify privatization of public schooling and other anti-public reform initiatives” (p. 37), with some of the factors behind this being “attempts to privatize and commodify every last space” (p. 44). Thinking about public schools as a commodity leads to framing “the public purposes of public schooling as the private action of business, thereby confusing the purpose of business to accumulate profit with the public service mission of public institutions” (Saltman, 2007, p. 38).

This ideology is a repetition of the corporate philanthropists in the Rockefeller era who married their own business interests with their philanthropic initiatives aimed at leading education in a direction to strengthen their own financial gains (Watkins, 2007). Even more recently philanthropists and policymakers drive the push for school voucher programs that not only take away funding from public schools but also lead to worse outcomes for students who attend voucher-eligible private schools (DeMatthews, 2025a). While a school leader may not feel like they have enough power to disrupt these structural corporate forces, being aware of them can be the first step in taking action.

Community With/In the School

Just as the broader society can have an impact on the school, the school can also impact the community. One participant in Newcomb and Niemeyer's (2015) study admitted, "it is not just about changing the lives of these individual children, it's about transforming the community at this point" (p. 792). This work can be done with the school as an integral site of community-building and with the school leader working in tandem with community members to serve community-driven goals. Parker et al. (2021) found that, when utilizing creative processes and working with community partners, "the inclusion of new partners and participants may give rise to innovation and excitement" (p. 10). In the Reconstruction South, scholars such as DuBois recognized the power of education to uplift or hinder the community (Kliebard, 2004, Ch. 7). Because of this enormous power, school leaders have the responsibility to hold an awareness of issues impacting the community.

Leaders can work through everyday practices as well as political and civic engagement. However, instead of waiting for a policy to be enacted that influences the school, leaders must work with the community. Khalifa (2012) defined community as "structures, institutions, and relationships that operate in the spaces community members occupy" (p. 427). This means being present in those spaces and considering "intersecting ideologies in mass media that undergird symbolic assaults on public schooling" (p. 37) and leading in such a way as to counteract such narratives. One method is to "change the framing and agenda setting of news media" (Boler & Nemorin, 2014, p. 400) that drives public opinion or to "frame [themselves] as a mediator" (Lowenhaupt, 2014, pp. 456-457) between external and internal influences.

Discussion

Implications for Practice

School leaders must be aware of these various influences within their own context through examining the networks at play within and imposing upon the school, knowing how societal beliefs translate into policy at the local, state, or federal level, and engaging in active citizenship with/in the community.

One way to examine the networks described above (Bolman & Deal, 2021; Deal et al., 2009) is to conduct an equity audit (Radd et al., 2021). However, to be most effective, the audit should be adapted to include information about the community surrounding the school, not just inside the school's walls. The leader can also gather informal information by immersing themselves in the community and speaking to members who may or may not be affiliated with the school. Questions such as "Who do community members go to for advice?" "What are community members' biggest concerns?" and "What are areas of pride for the community?" can provide an overview of priorities outside of academics.

Once a leader has decided to conduct an equity audit, there is more to the process than looking up data and filling in boxes. When I conducted an equity audit for an urban elementary school in South Texas, one area I wanted to examine was representation and support for LGBTQ+ students. However, most schools do not officially collect data on LGBTQ+ staff or students, so it was necessary for me to talk to members of the school community who had insider knowledge. There must also be an intentional plan for what comes after the equity audit. It is not enough to identify areas of concern, especially when policies and legislation from local, state, and federal structures influence what schools can (or cannot) do.

With schools increasingly becoming larger targets of partisan politics (DeMatthews, 2025b), school leaders must find ways to engage in policy and advocacy both for, with, and on behalf of the community (Khalifa, 2012). Local, state, and national organizations exist to engage not only educators but anyone who is interested in becoming more civically engaged. For example, the organization Raise Your Hand Texas offers different levels of involvement, from subscribing to newsletters to stay informed to coaching and helping plan meetings with legislative representatives (Raise Your Hand Texas, 2025).

School leaders must also stay up-to-date on how societal beliefs drive policy. For example, beliefs about the efficacy of public education lead to support of voucher programs, despite their ineffectiveness (DeMatthews, 2025a). Anti-transgender sentiment may seem like something that wouldn't impact schools, but it can also lead to legislators enacting policies that encroach on the autonomy of school leaders (Runnels, 2025). Engaging in active citizenship (Hinton, 2015) and policy advocacy in areas that don't directly impact the school can also build a bridge to build trust amongst community members (Khalifa, 2012).

Through a policy project in my M.Ed. in School Leadership program, I learned firsthand how leaders can engage with policy directly by advocating for issues important to the community. After examining equity data from our respective schools, districts, and county, we discovered a lack of support for teen parents trying to succeed academically, not just making it to high school graduation but entering and completing higher education as well (Peña Cook et al., 2025). Legislators (or their staff) were open and willing to hear from my team of educators as representatives of the community, and as school leaders, we were positioned well to investigate important issues and navigate spaces where community members may not feel welcome. Like the principal in Khalifa's (2012) study, we were able to feel more a part of the community once we built trust and opened avenues of two-way communication.

Implications for Research

Researchers should investigate how leaders deal with these pressures, consider their own positioning within the school contexts, and take into account various types of leadership in schools, not just the principalship. Creating teaching case studies is one way that researchers can impact the field of school leadership by helping leaders consider these issues in a theoretical manner that still offers a connection to practice (For examples see: Alemán, 2009; Ezzani, 2021). Researchers such as Chhuon (2014), Khalifa (2012), and Nguyen (2018) detail their connections to and interactions with research sites. In addition to providing transparency regarding the research process, this helps the reader and potential future researchers gain an understanding of how the researcher is not completely disconnected from the research they complete.

Finally, a broad description of 'school leadership' should be considered, as there are more leadership positions than principal, assistant principal, and superintendent. Lac and Diamond's (2019) article provided an example of how teachers can also assume leadership roles, even if they are not in official positions. By broadening this academic idea of leadership, we can provide support for emerging or aspiring leaders before they step into an official campus administrator role.

Conclusion

With so many layers to navigate school and community pressures, it may seem overwhelming to a school leader. However, being intentional in navigating the structures and relationship networks present in the school can open communication. When a leader joins a new school community, they should take steps to

learn the networks that are at play. However, it is not enough to simply be aware; effective school leaders must also be involved both in and outside of the school building. Taking steps to learn the formal and informal networks of the school and being both visible and involved in the community will help the school leader better respond to the daily pressures of the position.

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