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To cite this article: Terrance L. Green (2017) From positivism to critical theory: school-community relations toward community equity literacy, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 30:4, 370-387, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2016.1253892

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From positivism to critical theory: school-community relations toward community equity literacy

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ABSTRACT
In recent years, research on urban school–community relations has emerged with renewed vigor and a myriad of suggestions for how to best approach the topic. While most of these suggestions are anchored in positivist and interpretive epistemologies, a growing number of scholars are applying more critical approaches to school–community relations that center issues of equity and unequal power relations. However, these approaches are often perceived as being too impractical for educational leaders to implement. This article thus situates approaches to school–community relations across three epistemologies: positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory to make these ideas more accessible for educational leaders. With a focus on developing educational leaders to work equitably across school and community contexts, this article provides an operating framework for each approach that delineates assumptions, goals, views of families, strategies, and types of leadership. Finally, this article provides an epistemological grounding to propose that educational leaders develop what I call community equity literacy, and concludes with implications for future research.

The relationship between schools and communities is important because it can provide a foundation to improve student achievement and neighborhood outcomes (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Green, 2015; Warren, 2005). As such, research on school–community relations, particularly in urban contexts, has emerged with renewed interest in recent years. Policy-makers have added to this interest as the federal government recently incentivized place-based education reforms that make robust connections between schools and local communities, such as the Promise Neighborhoods Initiative (Horsford & Sampson, 2014). However, for place-based education reforms and other school–community strategies to be effective and equitable, educational leaders must be appropriately prepared to lead across multiple contexts because of their pivotal role in fostering partnerships between schools and communities (Auerbach, 2010; DeMatthews, 2016; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Ishimaru, 2013; Khalifa, 2012; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Miller, Wills, & Scanlan, 2013; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). Educational leaders are thus essential to successful school–community relationships.

As such, the ways that educational leaders perceive and approach school and community are significant, especially in low-income communities of color. Educational leaders’ perspectives, attitudes, and assumptions drive their beliefs and actions toward low-income students and their families (Gorski, 2013). Therefore, educational leaders need an equity-centered knowledge base and skill set that can engender more socially just approaches and practices across urban school–community relationships (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Developing such perspectives to school–community relations is important because most approaches are anchored in positivist and interpretive
epistemologies that de-center equity and often prepare school leaders to expect a neat list of ‘how-tos’ and ready-made answers for partnering with communities (Capper, in press; Capper & Green, 2013; Young, 1999).

Moreover, as the link between schools and communities has become more salient, scholars have examined a range of research at this intersection such as: principals in school–community relations (Auerbach, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Green, 2015; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ishimaru, 2013; Khalifa, 2012; Sanders & Harvey, 2002), the importance of linking school curricula and students’ homes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005), parental involvement and engagement in school–community partnerships (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernández, 2013; Carabrese-Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Epstein, 2001, 2008; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Lowenhaupt, 2014; Sanders, 2003, 2009), community organizing for urban school reform (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; Shirley, 1997; Warren & Mapp, 2011), and urban school reform linked with community development (Crowson & Boyd, 2001; Green, 2015; Keith, 1996; Patterson & Silverman, 2013; Warren, 2005). These bodies of research highlight that schools and their local neighborhoods, especially those in urban contexts, are inextricably linked, and that principals play a key role in school–community relations.

Additionally, scholars have also offered useful typologies to situate research on school–community relations. For example, Melaville (1998) provided a mapping project of 20 school–community initiatives and partnerships. Warren (2005) similarly identified three types of community–school collaborations that include the service model (e.g. full-service community schools), the development model (e.g. community-sponsored charter school), and the organizing model (e.g. school–community organizing). Auerbach (2010) proposed a four-part leadership continuum for school–family partnerships that situated leadership as preventing partnerships, nominalizing partnerships, traditionalizing partnerships, and authenticating partnerships. In doing so, she discussed goals, partnership orientation, view of families and parent roles, leadership styles, and school climate. Most recently, Valli, Stefanski, and Jacobson (2014) put forth a typology of school–community partnership models that highlights the theories of action and the conditions that shape each model. Collectively, these typologies and models are useful for understanding various school–community approaches. However, less research has epistemologically situated these and other approaches, as well as the literature, on school–community relations with the explicit focus to more equitably and critically guide educational leaders’ work in this area. This article aims to address this need.

The purpose of this article is to situate the literature and approaches to school–community relations across three epistemologies: positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory to make these ideas more accessible for educational leaders. In doing so, this article aims to provide an epistemological grounding for an emerging concept that I call community equity literacy (CEL). With a specific focus on developing educational leaders’ capacity to work equitably across both school and community contexts, this article builds on Auerbach’s (2010) work by offering an operating framework for the approaches within each epistemology that delineates key assumptions, goals, views of families, strategies, and types of leadership. Understanding these operating frameworks is important because it can help educational leaders locate their current practices, develop epistemological awareness, reflect critically on their work, and move toward employing more equity-centered practices.

In what follows, I first describe my use of the term epistemology and offer descriptions of the three epistemologies used in this article. In doing so, I use these epistemologies to present various frameworks and approaches for school–community relations. Finally, given the various frameworks and approaches, I propose and introduce that educational leaders develop CEL: an awareness/consciousness (knowledge) and skill set (actions) to address inequity in schools and communities, and conclude with implications for future research.
Defining epistemology

Epistemology refers to a person’s worldview, the nature of knowledge, and the production of knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Scheurich & Young, 1997). In essence, epistemology provides a basis to determine what types of knowledge are possible, legitimate, and adequate. Ladson-Billings (2000) expounds on this with her definition of epistemology, ‘a system of knowledge that has both an internal logic and external validity’ (p. 257). She continues:

Epistemology is linked intimately to worldview. Shujaa (1997) argues that worldviews and systems of knowing are symbiotic – that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by one’s worldview. Thus the conditions under which people live and learn shape both their knowledge and their worldview. (pp. 257–258)

Epistemology, then, informs how people view the world, and even act in the world. Therefore, situating approaches to school–community relations across various epistemologies is important because it can inform what knowledge educational leaders possess, consider legitimate, and draw from to guide their actions in school–community relations.

To delineate epistemologies, I draw on Capper (in press), Lather (2006), and Sipe and Constable's (1996) work that outlines common epistemologies used in social science research: positivism, interpretivism, and critical (see also Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). In drawing on these epistemologies, I offer four caveats. First, the traditional centering of these epistemologies reinforces a type of ‘epistemological privilege’ that gives more consideration to Eurocentric ways of knowing (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Scheurich & Young, 1997). As a result, there is a need to move educational leaders beyond these epistemological parameters, and help them develop alternative ways of seeing that differ from the dominant ways of knowing. As Ladson-Billings (2000) asserts:

The process of developing a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview requires active intellectual work on the part of the knower because schools, society, and the structure and production of knowledge are designed to create individuals who internalize the dominant worldview and knowledge production and acquisition process. It is thus my hope that educational leaders, and those that prepare them, will do the intellectual work necessary to produce alternative knowledge, approaches, and frameworks about students, families, and communities of color from low-income backgrounds that are equitable, humanizing, and asset based.

Second, I acknowledge the conflicting, and sometimes contradictory, ways that terms such as epistemology and framework are used in education research. My use of these terms, however, is not intended to provide rigid boundaries, but rather serve as guides for understanding these concepts. In delineating the various frameworks, my intention is not to permanently situate scholars into any particular category because researchers’ work can contribute to multiple approaches. Third, I purposefully use the term ‘school–community relations’ with an understanding that some view this terminology as privileging schools over community (e.g. Schutz, 2006). While that is not my intention, I use the term school–community relations because it is often more accessible for educational leaders to start from school-based perspectives and then move toward community-based perspectives, especially given the high-stakes accountability contexts in which many urban school principals lead. Fourth, it is important for educational leaders to develop epistemological awareness and diversity because it will push leaders’ intellectual thinking, teach leaders to examine the larger context of their work, provide leaders with analytic tools to make sense of the complexities of their work, and help leaders become epistemologically conscious (Capper, in press; Capper & Green, 2013; Pallas, 2001). In sum, with an understanding of these caveats, I next discuss how I epistemologically situate approaches to school–community relations across these frameworks.

Epistemologically situating approaches to school–community relations

In this section, I describe each epistemology, its conceptual precepts, and underlying assumptions as they relate to school–community relations. To make these ideas more accessible for educational leaders, within each epistemology, I have developed operating frameworks that delineate assumptions,
goals, views of families, strategies, and types of leadership. As such, I refer to these three operating frameworks as: the traditional framework (positivism), the collaborative framework (interpretivism), and the social justice framework (critical). Importantly, these frameworks may converge in inconsistent and incongruent ways, and are not intended to be exhaustive frameworks that fit into neat, linear categories. Rather, these operating frameworks are scaffolds instead of edifices to provide educational leaders with a sense of direction for them to do their own knowledge construction (Crotty, 1998). I next discuss each framework.

**Positivism’s traditional framework**

In education research, positivism has historically been privileged as the dominant epistemology from which knowledge has been produced. Beginning in England and emanating from the Enlightenment, ‘… positivism offers assurance of unambiguous and accurate knowledge of the world’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 18). A major goal of positivism is realizing objective knowledge that is characterized by efficiency, productivity, and logic (Crotty, 1998; Sipe & Constable, 1996). Positivists view reality and truth as objective, rationale, singular, and something to be discovered. From the positivist epistemology, decisions are top-down, and power is earned and based on individual merit (Capper, 1995). Due to the ubiquity of positivism in education, research on school–community relations has traditionally operated from positivism’s taken-for-granted assumptions, approaches, and norms that ‘institutionalize traditional ontological, epistemological, and methodological elements’ (Young, 1999, p. 678).

Educational leaders who operate from the traditional framework view school–community interactions as relations rather than partnerships in which the latter signifies a greater level of commitment and solidarity. These educational leaders often seek school–community approaches that are efficient, easily measurable, and scalable, usually with a focus on increasing the numeric representation of parental involvement and parents’ resources for the school. To implement the traditional framework, educational leaders employ strategies that are planned, manageable, often quick fixes, step-by-step, and linear (Mapp & Hong, 2010; Young, 1999).

In previous research on schools and communities, the traditional framework has been described as ‘individualistic, school-centered, and activity based’ (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009, p. 2244; see also Auerbach, 2010; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Young, 1999). According to several scholars (Auerbach, 2010; Schutz, 2006; Warren et al., 2009), the traditional framework is akin to approaches offered by Comer and Haynes (1991) and Epstein and Sanders (2006). As Warren et al. (2009) points out, an example of the traditional framework is the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). In the NNPS model, Epstein and colleagues emphasize the overlapping relationship between schools, families, and communities to ultimately impact student development and achievement. Highlighting the role of parenting as integral to school, family, and community relationships, Epstein provides a six-part framework for parental involvement, including parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with community (e.g. Epstein, 1987, 1995, 2001). NNPS and similar models are certainly important because they offer a means to expand individual’s conceptions of school, home, and community collaborations, as well as emphasize the importance of parental involvement in schools (Epstein, 2001). Often, however, educational leaders who work from the traditional framework are obsessed with finding the ‘one best’ school–community relations approach that is typically Epstein’s model or some variation that increases parental activity at the school.

One of the central features of the traditional framework is parental involvement because of the positive impacts that it has shown to have on student achievement (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Comer and Haynes (1991) contend that parents are important to the traditional framework because ‘parents are a natural link to the communities in which schools are located [as they] bring a community perspective to planning and management activities’ (p. 273). Hence, in the traditional framework, two-way communication between schools and parents/families is emphasized (Epstein, 2001), but administrators and teachers often determine the parameters and agenda of that communication (Auerbach,
Although two-way communication as put forth by Epstein (2001) encourages schools and parents to identify, plan, and work collectively on activities, these activities typically take on the form of open house events, bake sales, and parents volunteering at the school (Auerbach, 2010; Epstein, 1987, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002).

The traditional framework is important but limited in its knowledge and intended impact for several reasons. First, the traditional framework has been critiqued for de-emphasizing power relations between schools and communities, administrators and teachers, and teachers and parents, especially along racial and socioeconomic lines (Carabrese-Barton et al., 2004; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Schutz, 2006). While the focus on improving parental involvement is important, in the traditional framework, this is often done while keeping the existing asymmetrical power structures in place between schools, communities, parents, and students (Fine, 1993; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Schutz, 2006). Second, the traditional framework (both implicitly and explicitly) puts forth normative understandings about parental involvement in schools, which is often anchored in white middle-class persons as parental archetypes and fails to critically consider a diversity of parents at the intersections of race, social class, gender, ability, language, immigration, religion, and sexual orientation (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Carabrese-Barton et al., 2004; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Schutz, 2006). As such, parents are sometimes expected to participate in school-related activities during the middle of the day, which is most convenient for middle- to upper class parents (e.g. ‘stay-at-home moms’). By default, this excludes many low-income and working-class parents because they are often at work during the middle of the day (Mapp & Hong, 2010).

Third, in the traditional framework, community is often only appropriated when it benefits schools’ interests (Schutz, 2006). Thus, for those educational leaders who operate from the traditional framework, ‘communities are helpful to schools when they support the school’s mission and harmful when they resist or criticize the mission in some way’ (Schutz, 2006, p. 704). Though many schools’ interests and activities to increase parental involvement have merit, when they are not connected to a larger community equity agenda, such activities often become reduced to a basic ‘… head count and information dissemination versus relationship building’ (Mapp & Hong, 2010, p. 348 see also Green, 2016).

In anchoring the traditional framework in positivism, I argue that several distinctions emerge around assumptions, goals, views of families, strategies, and types of leadership (see Figure 1). **Assumptions.** First, schools are assumed to be independent institutions that can function efficiently and effectively, but leaders operating from this perspective recognize the importance of overlapping relationships between schools, families, and community. Stakeholders are, however, often in pursuit of the elusive one best school–community model that includes schools, families, and community. Stakeholders are, however, often in pursuit of the elusive one best school–community model that includes schools, families, and community. As such, having parental involvement is viewed as advantageous mainly because of its potential to improve student outcomes, and parents with the fiscal means can contribute resources to the school (Schutz, 2006). In addition, ‘good parenting’ is almost positioned as a panacea for nearly every problem that children experience in school, and a lack of good parenting is typically cited as the cause of low student performance.

![](image)

**Figure 1.** Positivism’s traditional framework.
**Goals.** The central goal of the traditional framework is to establish two-way, school-driven relationships with parents that are quantifiable and yield tangible outcomes for students and the school (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). In essence, improving student achievement to meet accountability standards is the ultimate goal of school–community relations from this framework.

**View of families.** Educational leaders whose practices are guided by the traditional framework often tacitly assume that every child lives with her or his parents (or guardian) in a traditional, heterosexual family structure. Two-parent white, middle-class parenting practices are viewed as the ‘norm’ and standard parental involvement practices (see Figure 1). In addition, low-income parents of color are often viewed from deficit perspectives and as clients to be served and taught white middle-class parenting skills (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Carabrese-Barton et al., 2004; Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Fine, 1993; Green & Gooden, 2014; Lareau & Shumar, 1996; Schutz, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Parents of color from low-income backgrounds therefore have limited power or influence in schools’ decision-making processes despite rhetoric that says otherwise (Fine, 1993; Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Lawson, 2003).

**Strategies.** Educational leaders employ top-down, school-driven, bureaucratic strategies that regularly fail to foster authentic partnerships between schools and communities (Anderson, 1998; Auerbach, 2010; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Warren et al., 2009). For example, these educational leaders might employ strategies such as: bake sales, raffles, open houses, back-to-school nights, volunteering at the school, homework help, workshops for parents on child-rearing, bus rides through low-income neighborhoods, and coffee with the principal during the school day. Though these are not inherently bad practices – although the bus ride through low-income neighborhoods can be condescending and a form of symbolic violence on communities – they are however shortsighted when implemented only for school-centric purposes and with no greater end in mind. Yet, in the traditional framework, schools are seen as having the strategy for how to best work with community stakeholders as community persons must fit into such predetermined strategies and outreach activities, if not, they can be considered deviant (Carabrese-Barton et al., 2004).

**Types of leadership.** Like the strategies, top-down, bureaucratic leadership is employed, even though there is collaboration between schools and communities. The central leaders in this framework are those who are at the top of the school power structure such as principals, teachers, and middle-class parents (Miller, Brown, & Hopson, 2011). However, middle-class parents in the traditional framework may also earn power though their charitable donations to the school, which may give them more perceived power than principals. However, the more involved parents are, the greater voice they can earn (i.e. buy) at the school.

In sum, the traditional framework upholds many of the objective truths of positivism. While this framework offers some useful insights for educational leaders, it is limited, as educational leaders and those that train them should be challenged to go beyond the confines of the traditional framework. To do so, I next discuss the collaborative framework, which is grounded in the interpretivist epistemology.

**Interpretivism’s collaborative framework**

In the interpretivist epistemology, all knowledge and reality are created through social interactions between people and their world, and is developed within a social context (Crotty, 1998; Sipe & Constable, 1996). Hence, meaning and truth are not discovered, as in the positivist epistemology, but rather constructed. The interpretivist epistemology does not describe reality as neither objective nor subjective, but it can be both at the same time (Crotty, 1998). Those working from this epistemology believe in many socially constructed truths, and that discourse is dialogic and creates reality (Lather, 2006). The primary goal of the interpretivist epistemology is understanding, and educational leaders who take this position value cooperation, dialogue, interaction, and democratic practices (Capper, in press; Crotty, 1998; Lather, 2006).

Educational leaders who operate from the collaborative framework view school–community interactions as engagement rather than just involvement or relations because as Carabrese-Barton et al. (2004) assert, ‘… involvement has been used to describe what parents do … engagement expands our
understanding to include parents’ orientation to the world and how those orientations frame what they do’ (p. 4). As such, these leaders celebrate collaborative engagement, egalitarian practices, and shared vision planning with community stakeholders. These educational leaders also employ strategies that aim to increase parental engagement and participation. However, it is with the intent to go beyond numeric metrics, as in the traditional framework, and develop authentic relationships (Anderson, 1998; Auerbach, 2010; Ruffin & Brooks, 2010). One of the most prominent examples that leaders employ in the collaborative framework is the community schools model (Dryfoos, 1994; Dryfoos & Maquire, 2002). According to Blank, Jacobson, and Melaville (2012), community schools are:

A place and set of partnerships connecting a school, the families of students, and the surrounding community. A community school is distinguished by an integrated focus on academics, youth development, family support, health and social services, and community development. Community schools extend the days and week, reaching students, their families, and community residents in unique ways. Community schools are thus uniquely equipped to develop their students into educated citizens who are ready and able to give back to their communities. (Blank et al., 2012, p. 1)

Community schools thus seek to transform local educational institutions into neighborhood hubs that provide a range of services for students, their families, and community members (Dryfoos & Maquire, 2002). Thus, interagency and networked collaboration is a central feature of this framework (e.g. Miller, 2011).

The collaborative framework, especially in the community schools model, has been shown to be useful in various contexts (e.g. urban, rural, and/or first-ring suburbs) (Blank et al., 2012; Dryfoos & Maquire, 2002). A feature of this model is engaging and making low-income parents active participants in school efforts. However, some scholars argue that earlier notions of community schools embraced deficit ideas about stakeholders of color from low-income backgrounds (Keith, 1996; Schutz, 2006). Particularly, research has shown that parents have been viewed and positioned as recipients of services instead of change agents that are able to name and transform their reality (Keith, 1996). Another component of the collaborative framework is partnerships between schools and a host of social, educational, and health care service providers that meet student and broader community needs (Dryfoos & Maquire, 2002; Melaville, 2004).

While research indicates that the collaborative framework can be used to bring about important school changes (Green & Gooden, 2014; Officer, Grim, Medina, Bringle, & Foreman, 2013; Warren, 2005), the framework is limited in several ways. Though the interpretivist epistemology centers ideals of collaboration and participation, Capper (in press) argues, [it] ‘ignore[s] privilege, identity, oppression, equity and social justice’ (p. 11). Thus, educational leaders may employ collaborative and democratic practices, but they frequently do so in manners that leave existing privilege, oppression, and inequity unchecked. Research also shows that when educational leaders try to implement more collaborative and democratic practices, they often only share leadership responsibilities with other professionals, which maintains existing power relations (Auerbach, 2010; Chrispeels, 2004). Therefore, educational leadership practices from the collaborative framework can most easily give the ‘illusion of inclusion,’ but ultimately further exacerbate inequities in the school and community contexts.

In anchoring the collaborative framework in interpretivism, I argue that several distinctions emerge around assumptions, goals, views of families, strategies, and types of leadership (see Figure 2). Assumptions. Educational leaders who work from the collaborative framework assume that schools and their local communities function interdependently, synergistically, and uniquely of each other. Given this, the prevailing assumption is that there is not one best approach for this school–community engagement. Rather, the best school–community approach is contextual and whatever has been constructed through dialog and collaboration between a range of school and neighborhood stakeholders (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011; Jean-Marie & Curry, 2012; Jean-Marie, Ruffin, & Burr, 2010; Ruffin & Brooks, 2010). Goals. A key goal of the collaborative framework is community engagement and participation that occurs through horizontal partnerships with local stakeholders (Blank et al., 2012; Ruffin & Brooks, 2010). Thus, developing strong partnerships with local organizations such as social service providers, churches, community centers, health care providers, adult education agencies, and financial institutions
is integral to the collaborative framework (Green & Gooden, 2014; Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009). Another goal of the collaborative framework is to use participation and engagement to build on existing neighborhood strengths (Ruffin & Brooks, 2010).

View of families and parents. In the collaborative framework, while parents are important, the lens is expanded to include a diversity of family members and guardians. Here, educational leaders understand that children come from a variety of backgrounds and that some children are homeless (Miller, 2011). Horizontal partnerships are thus valued in this framework because parents and families are seen as having meaning and the ability to express their lived experiences, although this does not always occur in practice (Keith, 1996; Schutz, 2006). Therefore, schools partner with local agencies to meet student, family, and community members’ needs inside of the school (e.g. Communities in Schools), as the school often becomes the center of the community, and a place that provides resources for the community (e.g. GED classes, fiscal services, etc.) (Green & Gooden, 2014).

Strategies. Educational leaders in the collaborative framework use democratic forms of dialogue to construct understanding and consensus among school and community stakeholders. They also employ community surveys, interviews, community advisory councils, community visioning, and community asset maps to better understand local neighborhoods where schools are located (e.g. Green, 2016; Minkler & Hancock, 2008). Inter-organization partnerships and frequent community meetings are used to create space for rich dialogues. These leaders most saliently acknowledge issues of poverty and health care inaccessibility and their impacts on student learning and development, and thus seek to bring doctors and social service providers into schools to meet children’s needs (e.g. full-service community school). Yet, while doing this, the unequal power dynamics that reproduce inequities like systemic racism and urban poverty and other forms of oppression often remain in place. Types of leadership. Rather than top-down leadership, decisions are made through teams of people from different positions that share responsibility (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011). As such, forms of distributed leadership, shared leadership, boundary spanning, and cross-boundary leadership are valued in the framework (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011; Green, 2015; Jean-Marie et al., 2010). Similarly, the educational leadership lens is expanded beyond school principals to also include community leaders, some parents, community members, school–community directors, and other stakeholders who share responsibility and tasks to create robust connections between schools and communities (Adams & Jean-Marie, 2011; Miller, 2008).

In sum, the collaborative framework encourages many of the aspects of interpretivism like participation and shared understanding (Capper, in press). While this framework offers some important
suggestions for educational leaders like collaboration, democracy, and mutual understanding, the framework also has some blind spots. I next discuss the social justice framework that is anchored in the critical epistemology, which addresses several of the collaborative framework's limitations.

**Critical epistemology's social justice framework**

The critical tradition calls into question prevailing ideology and taken-for-granted truths (Lather, 2006; McLaren, 2009). Those who operate from a critical epistemology, according to Crotty (1998), ‘…find themselves interrogating commonly held values and assumptions, challenging conventional social structures, and engaging in social action’ (p. 157). In essence, critical theorists start from the premise that people are ‘essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege’ (McLaren, 2009, p. 61). An analysis of unequal power relations anchors the critical epistemology. Crotty argues, ‘Critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice’ that often link to race, class, and gender interests (p. 157).

Educational leaders who embrace the critical tradition, however, seek to initiate change for marginalized groups and have a propensity to act against oppressive conditions (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 1970; Lather, 2006; Sipe & Constable, 1996). In doing so, these educational leaders acknowledge community power structures and view contemporary inequities through a historical perspective (Lyon & Driskell, 2012). Additionally, the notion of dialectic is central in the critical epistemology. By dialectic I mean issues in society are not isolated events of individuals or aberrations in the social structure, but rather part of an inextricably linked historical context between society and individuals. Hence, educational leaders working from this framework critically understand how urban schools and communities are inextricably linked and recognize the necessity to address school-related issues along with the community-based context in which schools are nested (Green, 2015; Milner, 2013; Milner IV, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O’Connor, 2015; Noguera & Wells, 2011; Warren, 2005). These leaders agree with Anyon’s (1997) assertion, ‘Attempting to fix inner city schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door’ (p. 168). Thus, through a dialectic understanding, those who embrace a critical epistemology are able to see the potential of schools as both sites for social reproduction and empowerment for entire neighborhoods (McLaren, 2009).

Educational leaders who operate from the social justice framework understand that urban schools are ‘critically shaped by race, class, gender, culture, and language, as well as by schools’ response to diverse families and power differentials’ (Auerbach, 2010, p. 730 see also Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Lowenhaupt, 2014). These leaders view school–community interactions as an equity-centered partnership against injustice rather than just involvement, relations, or engagement (e.g. Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). Partnership in this instance signifies a form of solidarity between stakeholders with different positionalities. While educational leaders of the traditional framework are concerned about knowing the one best school–community relations model, and those of the collaborative framework are concerned with reaching shared understanding, educational leaders of the social justice framework are concerned with advancing equity and reshaping unequal power relationships among school–community actors, contexts, and institutions. As Young (1999) notes, educational leaders who work in the social justice framework also:

- Explore how policies that are presented as reality serve primarily as political rhetoric; how knowledge, power, and resources are distributed inequitably; how programs like parental involvement reproduce stratified social relations; how schools institutionalize those with whom they come into contact; and how individuals react (e.g. resistance or acquiescence) to such social and institutional forces.

These leaders thus think more deeply and critically about school–community relations as well as the ways in which they can more equitably re-situate power relations that perpetuate injustice.

Further, educational leaders working in the social justice framework aim to eliminate practices that reproduce social stratification within and outside of schools (Green, 2016; Young, 1999). To do so, leaders are encouraged to make significant changes in structures and practices to reallocate resources and power to parents, teachers, students, and community stakeholders (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015;
Ishimaru, 2013; Sarason, 1995; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Warren et al., 2009). These educational leaders also recognize the power of human agency to act against inequalities, and consistently question whether their decisions reproduce educational and social inequities, and privilege white middle-class interests in school–community partnerships. They are also concerned with and regularly question how their approaches reduce or reproduce existing school–community inequities (e.g. Young, 1999). Some of the most popular examples in the social justice framework are community organizing and political action for school reform (Mediratta & Fruchter, 2001; Shirley, 1997; Warren & Mapp, 2011), principals sharing power with parents of color from low-income backgrounds (Ishimaru, 2013; Khalifa, 2012; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015), and approaches that develop relational power (e.g. power with) instead of unilateral power over communities, parents, and community-based organizations (i.e. power over) (Warren, 2005; Warren et al., 2009).

Anchored in the critical epistemology, the social justice framework is important and provides space for more authentic and community-based coalitions to form (Anderson, 1998; Auerbach, 2010; Cooper, 2009). However, like the other frameworks, the social justice framework also has limitations. A main limitation with the social justice framework is that it does not make ‘community-based equity’ explicit to its efforts. While the framework’s focus on building collective power to transform inequitable school conditions is essential, if these efforts do not address the larger community-based inequities, such as racism, poverty, segregation, and violence – that shape in school conditions, then the core issues could remain unabated (Green, 2015, Milner, 2013). Another limitation of this framework is the end point of social justice and equity is rarely critiqued, and has even become diluted, which provides opportunities for these goals to become co-opted or merely rhetoric (Capper, 1998; Dantley & Green, 2015). Thus, educational leaders could espouse a discourse of social justice all while inequities abound within their school and local community.

In grounding the social justice framework in the critical epistemology, I contend that several distinctions emerge around assumptions, goals, views of families, strategies, and types of leadership (see Figure 3). Assumptions. Since the world is cloaked with oppression, without a focus on justice and equity, schools are assumed to be sites of stratified social reproduction. However, if anchored in justice and equity, schools can become sites of empowerment for students, families, and communities, especially for those that have been traditionally disenfranchised (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly 2004; Theoharis, 2009).

Goals. The central goal of the social justice framework is to transform the school and power relations between school–community actors in equitable and empowering ways. In doing so, stakeholders develop

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Goal(s)</th>
<th>View of Families</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Type of Leadership</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Without a focus on justice &amp; equity, schools operate as sites of social reproduction; schools exist to interrupt inequity, oppression, and inequality; schools can be critical sites for social change for traditionally underserved groups</td>
<td>School-community transformation in equitable ways; equity and justice; empower and develop critical consciousness with families &amp; community actors</td>
<td>Students, parents, and families are viewed as change agents; parents/families/community actors must organize to act in solidarity</td>
<td>Grassroots community organizing with equitable representation; community mapping &amp; goal – setting with the goal of equitable change</td>
<td>Social justice leadership; Freirean leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Critical theory’s social justice framework.
critical consciousness to situate their work within a larger social-political and historical context. In essence, equitable societal change through schools and neighborhood institutions is the major goal of this framework.

View of families. Educational leaders whose practices are guided by the social justice framework often seek to reconfigure power relations between schools, families, and even community power structures. As such, students, parents, families, and community members are seen as active change agents who are able to name and collectively transform their reality (Ishimaru, 2013; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Thus, a focus is placed on developing parental power (Gold, Rhodes, Brown, Lytle, & Waff, 2001; Ishimaru, 2013; Stovall, 2004; Warren, 2005). However, to do so requires these actors to organize and act in solidarity against oppressive structures and practices.

Strategies. Educational leaders often employ grass-roots, community-organizing strategies such as: community asset mapping and visioning, community dialogs, adult education class that raise critical consciousness, protests, develop parent leadership, and civic participation that work toward equitable ends (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Gold et al., 2001; Green, 2016; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Khalifa, 2012; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Lyon & Driskell, 2012; Minkler & Hancock, 2008). In employing these strategies, educational leaders aim to co-construction solutions and knowledge with local stakeholders, as well, the organized stakeholders determine how solutions will be collectively implemented (Campano et al., 2015). Further, these leaders aim to disrupt asymmetrical power dynamics between school and community stakeholders. For example, these educational leaders might argue for radical changes in school board structures to reallocate that power to parents, teachers, and the community (Sarason, 1995).

Types of leadership. While school leaders fully understand that they work in top-down, bureaucratic organizations, they employ social justice and Freirean leadership approaches that start with the notion that everyone is equal despite their positionality (Green, 2016). In this perspective, educational leaders work with communities on concerns that they collectively identify (Campano et al., 2015; Carabrese-Barton et al., 2004).

In sum, the social justice framework is useful for transforming schools into more equitable institutions for all students and for building large bases of collective action with parents and community organizations (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Ishimaru, 2013; Lopez, 2003). Though limited in some areas, this framework provides a firm foundation on which to build even more equitable practices. To this end, while all of these frameworks offer educational leaders strengths as well as limitations, I propose that educational leaders integrate the equitable practices from these approaches and transform them into a set of knowledge and actions that are accessible for educational leaders in school–community context. I next discuss this.

Community equity literacy

Given these various approaches to schools and communities, there is a need to begin to organize the knowledge and skills that educational leaders need to work equitably with communities. I thus draw across these reviewed approaches, but mainly critical theory’s social justice approach, to offer guidance to educational leaders in this work. To do so, I borrow from Gorski’s (2013) notion of ‘equity literacy’ and Horsford’s (2014) notion of ‘racial literacy.’ According to Gorski, equity literacy is the skills and dispositions that ‘enable us to recognize, respond to, and redress conditions that deny some students access to the educational opportunities enjoyed by their peers and, in doing so, sustain equitable learning environments for all students and families’ (p. 19). Similarly, racial literacy offers a lens to understand racism in America. It views racism as contextual, it emphasizes the relationship between race and power, and it focuses on the intersections of race, class, geography, and other explanatory variables (Guinier, 2004). However, I draw on Horsford’s notion of racial literacy because she connects it to a four-step process to improve educational leaders’ practice, which begins with understanding the origins and ways that race operates in schools and society. Together, I draw from these notions and propose that educational leaders develop what I call CEL: an awareness/consciousness (knowledge) and skill set (actions) to address inequities in schools and their neighborhood communities. In addressing inequities in school, leaders focus on improving student achievement through closing opportunity gaps,
providing a solid framework for instruction, and delivering services in inclusive ways (Carter & Welner, 2013; Milner, 2012). Developing CEL offers a practical first step for educational leaders to improve their school–community practice and understanding, and to build equity-centered partnerships with their school's local community.

CEL is comprised of five components: (a) understanding community history (Horsford, 2010; Lyon & Driskell, 2012), (b) working from asset- and structural-based perspectives about community (Gorski, 2013; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mapp & Hong, 2010), (c) recognizing and leveraging community assets (Green, 2015, 2016), (d) navigating the community power structure (Lyon & Driskell, 2012), and (e) advocating for community and school equity (Green, 2016). I next briefly discuss each component (Figure 4).

**Understanding community history.** To start, school leaders should develop a deep and rich understanding of the community where their school is located (Green & Gooden, 2014; Horsford, 2010; Khalifa, 2012). This essentially suggests that educational leaders become knowledgeable about the origins of the community, why, how, and if the community has changed racially, socioeconomically, and culturally over time. For example, to develop this understanding, it might require educational leaders to interview community members, spend time in the community at local organizations (churches, barbershops, neighborhood centers, etc.), and analyze old newspaper articles and library archives about the community (Green, 2016). To foster authentic partnerships and coalitions with parents, local neighborhood groups, and community-based organizations, it is vital for educational leaders to know this history because it will allow them to historically understand contemporary inequities. In doing this, leaders become aware of the ways in which racism has and continues to shape neighborhood conditions.

**Working from asset- and structural-based perspectives about community.** To work in authentic solidarity with communities, educational leaders must relinquish deficit perspectives about the students, parents, and communities they serve (Valencia, 1997). Therefore, it is imperative that educational leaders develop asset-based perspectives about students, parents, and families that appreciate the strengths and gifts that these persons possess (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Valencia, 1997). This should also be coupled with an understanding about how racialized inequitable structures as well as discriminatory practices and policies have shaped low-income communities of color (Green, 2015; Massey & Denton, 1993; Soja, 2010), such as student homelessness, concentrated poverty, and violence (Miller, 2012; Milner, 2013; Milner et al., 2015).

**Recognizing and leveraging community assets.** As leaders develop asset- and structural-based perspectives, along with a history of the community, these leaders are positioned to leverage these assets.

<table>
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<th>Components</th>
<th>Principles</th>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding community history</td>
<td>Every child has the universal right to live in an opportunity-rich neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working from asset and structural-based perspectives about community</td>
<td>What leaders believe about people of color from low-income backgrounds informs how they relate to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing and Leveraging community assets</td>
<td>Inequitable communities are not the result of people but unjust systems, policies, and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating the community power structure</td>
<td>Leaders constantly resist deficit-based perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating for community and school equity</td>
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**Figure 4.** Community equity literacy's components and principles.

Note: These principles are not intended to directly correspond to the CEL components as illustrated in the chart.
Moll and colleagues’ (1992) notion of funds of knowledge and Yosso’s (2005) notion of community cultural wealth – the skills, cultural knowledge, abilities, and contacts that socially marginalized groups possess – are critical assets that educational leader and their teams may leverage to improve student outcomes and community conditions. To recognize other types of community assets, these leaders might create community asset maps that identify places of worship, social service agencies, nonprofit organizations, and host of other institutional and personal assets (Green, 2016; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). These leaders also draw from community surveys, host community dialogues, and conduct community interviews to identify what a range of neighborhood stakeholders consider assets. However, to effectively leverage these assets against areas of inequity, the leaders also collect data on community opportunity data, which often manifest in the school, such as educational attainment levels, poverty levels, and other opportunity areas that have an impact on students, families, and community members’ lives (Lyon & Driskell, 2012; Miller, 2012; powell7, Reece, & Gambhir, 2007). With recognition of the community inequities, CEL leaders then work in collaboration with local actors to leverage the assets and resources in their sphere of influence to address these issues.

Navigating the community power structure. In this article, the community power structure refers to the individuals and organizations that make key decisions in the community (Lyon & Driskell, 2012; Scanlan & Johnson, 2015). CEL leaders thus schedule time to identify and spend quality time with neighborhood leaders who hold both formal and informal positions of power. CEL leaders thus develop strong partnerships with these individuals and organizations to understand what the community views as assets, set short- and long-term goals for improving the community, and partner to access resources to achieve these goals as well as use their collective power to take action against school and community concerns. They also aim to reshape this power structure in more equitable and accessible ways for all students, families, and community members.

Advocating for community and school equity. In the end, community equity literate educational leaders work toward school and community equity. These leaders imagine high-achieving equitable schools existing in neighborhoods that provide rich opportunities and resources to all students and community members, regardless of race, social class, gender, or any other socially constructed identity of difference.

Additionally, three principles anchor the components of CEL. First, community equity literate leaders believe that every child, especially students of color from low-income backgrounds, have the universal right to live in equitable communities that have a range of opportunities, such as high-quality schools, affordable housing, safety, high-quality health care, and good-paying jobs (Gorski, 2013; Miller, 2012). Second, community equity literate leaders know that what she or he believes about people of color who live in low-income urban communities informs how they relate to them. If leaders blame the people for their conditions, then they will try to fix them. Conversely, if they believe that unfair systems have greatly shaped inequitable school–community conditions, then they will try to fix them instead. Third, since CEL leaders adopt asset- and structural-based perspectives, they constantly resist deficit views about people of color from low-income, urban communities. As leaders integrate the CEL components into their practices, grounded in these principles, it should produce shifts in consciousness that lead to new ways of seeing that create more equitable outcomes across urban school–community relations (Gorski, 2013).

Conclusion

To confront the increasing levels of inequity in urban school-communities, it is essential that educational leaders be prepared to understand and work with a range of school and community stakeholders to eradicate these issues. As such, I have drawn across several epistemologies and frameworks on school–community relations to initially propose CEL as an emerging concept for educational leaders who aim to address school–community injustices. Developing CEL thus provides a useful place for educational leaders, and those who prepare them, to start grappling with alternative ways of seeing that will create new ways of acting with schools and communities, especially those in urban contexts. While I situate CEL in the social justice framework, it could be applied to enhance any of the school–community approaches described in this paper.
Although the purpose of this paper was to situate approaches to school–community relations across three epistemologies and introduce CEL, more research is needed in several areas. First, more research is needed to flesh out the conceptual components of CEL, which could be done through positioning CEL as an epistemic framework that includes delineating knowledge, skills, value, identity, and epistemological aspects (Collins & Ferguson, 1993). Establishing a robust conceptual framework for CEL could undergird capacity building for school leaders and a research agenda on the topic. Second, future research is needed to document the qualitative and quantitative impacts of community equity literate leaders’ practice on educational and neighborhood outcomes, longitudinally. As such, educational leadership programs should integrate curriculum that helps aspiring school leaders develop CEL. Incorporating this into preparation programs will more robustly prepare aspiring school leaders with a practical consciousness and skill set to work in solidarity with school and community stakeholders. Third, future research should focus on developing an instrument to assess aspiring and practicing school leaders’ CEL over time. An instrument as such would be useful in providing school leaders and their teams with much needed information to improve their practice and could be used for evaluative purposes. Grounding school–community work approaches epistemologically can push leaders to think and act beyond traditional frameworks. Finally, CEL is important to helping educational leaders develop enduring, authentic, and equity-centered partnerships between urban communities and schools to sustain their work. I hope this article signifies the starting point of a research agenda on CEL and educational leaders that will take head-on the injustices that impact schools and their local communities.

Notes

1. In this article, I use the terms educational leaders and school leaders interchangeably to mainly refer to school principals, although these terms could also include individuals in community-based spaces.
2. These authors also include postmodernism, but I did not include it in this particular analysis.
3. For example, Sanders has published very meaningful and useful work that is reflective of both the traditional and interpretivist frameworks.
4. I have the utmost respect for Epstein, Sanders, Haynes, Comer, and any other scholar cited in the traditional section. Their work is certainly important and this paper is in no way intended to discredit their research, but to situate it among various approaches.
5. Horsford’s (2011, 2014) notion of racial literacy focuses on four steps: racial literacy, racial realism, racial reconstruction, and racial reconciliation.
6. I have a manuscript under review that details CEL and its alignment with the most recent ISLLC Standards.
7. I purposefully spell powell with a lowercase ‘p’ because that is how the author spells his name.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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