

Education Review

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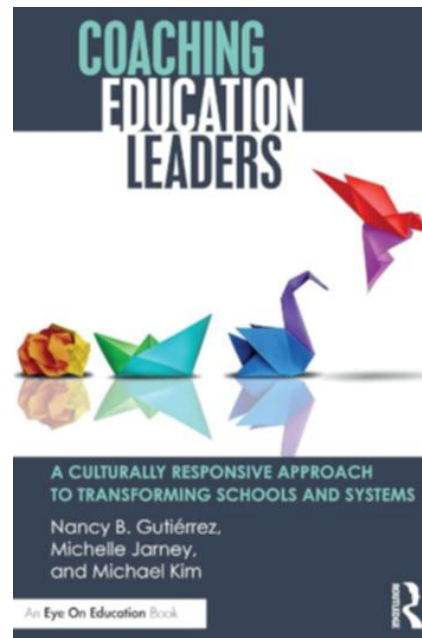
Gutierrez, N. B., Jarney, M., & Kim, M. (2025). *Coaching education leaders: A culturally responsive approach to transforming schools and systems*. Routledge.

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In *Coaching Education Leaders*, **Nancy Gutierrez**, **Michelle Jarney** and **Michael Kim** challenge traditional leadership coaching models by positioning coaching not as a mechanism for accountability or remediation, but as an equity-centered process of systemic transformation. Rather than treating leadership development as an individualized or technocratic endeavor, the authors conceptualize coaching as relational, identity-driven, and organizationally interconnected work. The text ultimately argues that culturally responsive coaching must move beyond improving isolated leadership competencies and instead cultivate reflective leaders capable of disrupting inequitable education systems.



At a time when educational leadership increasingly operates within high-pressure accountability structures, the authors offer an important counter-narrative. The authors reject deficit-oriented leadership models that reduce improvement to performance metrics and procedural compliance. Instead, the authors advocate for facilitative competency-based (FCB) coaching, emphasizing that “the goal is to not only identify areas for improvement but to actively facilitate the development journey” (p. 12). This distinction is one of the book’s most significant conceptual contributions because it reframes coaching as developmental identity work rather than evaluative supervision.

This emphasis on development is particularly relevant to emerging scholarship on teacher identity and educator leadership formation. Educational systems frequently position teachers as implementers of institutional mandates rather than reflective

leaders with evolving professional identities. Gutierrez and her co-authors challenge this framing by suggesting that leadership growth is iterative, relational, and deeply influenced by self-awareness and reflection. The text therefore contributes meaningfully to broader conversations regarding how coaching practices shape educators' perceptions of agency, efficacy, and leadership capacity.

The authors further extend this argument by asserting that “learning for the coach, the education leader, and the organization are interwoven and ongoing during coaching” (p. 21). This statement reflects one of the strongest dimensions of their argument: its rejection of fragmented models of school improvement. Rather than isolating leadership growth within individual administrators, they position coaching as organizational learning work that depends on interconnected relationships across systems. In doing so, they implicitly critique educational structures that compartmentalize leadership, instruction, and organizational change into disconnected initiatives.

This systems-oriented perspective is particularly compelling because contemporary educational reform often expects transformational outcomes while maintaining organizational conditions that inhibit collective learning. Schools frequently operate within cultures shaped by performative accountability, time scarcity, and policy mandates that constrain authentic collaboration. Although the authors convincingly advocate for interconnected leadership learning, they occasionally underestimate the institutional barriers that complicate the sustainability of such coaching models in practice. Greater engagement with how systemic constraints, including labor demands, policy pressures, and leadership turnover, affect culturally responsive coaching implementation would strengthen the book's critical depth.

Gutierrez, Jarney and Kim's emphasis on equity-centered leadership is most explicitly articulated in the discussion of the six equity leadership dispositions (pp. 30–37): reflecting on personal assumptions and beliefs, modeling equity-grounded leadership, acting with cultural responsiveness, building organizational capacity to identify inequities, confronting deficit-oriented assumptions, and creating equitable systems. These dispositions collectively position leadership as ethical and relational work rather than managerial performance. Importantly, the framework challenges leaders to interrogate how personal identity, institutional power, and systemic inequities shape educational experiences for historically marginalized groups of students.

The authors argue that “creating a learning environment where every student thrives does not just magically happen. It requires a particular kind of leadership” (p. 30). While compelling, this claim raises important theoretical questions regarding what distinguishes this “particular kind” of leadership from existing transformational, instructional, or social justice leadership models. Although the book clearly advocates culturally responsive and equity-driven leadership practices, portions of the framework overlap conceptually with broader social justice leadership scholarship. More explicit differentiation between culturally responsive coaching and adjacent leadership theories would strengthen the text's scholarly contribution.

Nevertheless, the book's greatest strength lies not in theoretical novelty alone, but in its integration of reflection, relational trust, and systems consciousness into practical coaching frameworks. The authors consistently emphasize leadership transformation

requires vulnerability, reflexivity, and emotional awareness—dimensions often minimized in traditional educational leadership preparation programs.

One of the book's most compelling conceptual moments emerges in its discussion of "the kitchen" in Chapter 4. The kitchen functions metaphorically as a space where authentic, unfiltered conversations occur, a place where educational leaders can move beyond institutional performance and engage in relational truth-telling. Symbolically, the kitchen represents emotional honesty, trust, vulnerability, and the hidden labor of leadership work.

The kitchen metaphor is particularly powerful because it challenges performative leadership cultures in which administrators are expected to project certainty, composure, and expertise at all times. Educational leaders often navigate highly politicized environments where vulnerability is interpreted as weakness rather than reflective practice. By framing the kitchen as a site of authenticity and growth, Gutierrez and her co-authors highlight the importance of relational spaces where leaders can critically reflect on identity, inequity, and organizational tension.

At the same time, the metaphor invites critique. Access to the "kitchen" is not equally distributed within education systems. Power hierarchies, race, positionality, and institutional politics shape who is permitted authentic participation in these relational spaces. While the authors celebrate the kitchen as transformative, they could further interrogate how exclusion, gatekeeping, and organizational power influence who is invited into these conversations and whose experiences remain marginalized.

The authors' treatment of feedback and dialogue is similarly nuanced and thought-provoking. They acknowledge that "your experiences, biases, beliefs, and perspectives color how you give and receive feedback, just as aspects of your coachee's identity inform how they interpret and internalize what you say" (p. 95). This insight is particularly significant because it challenges technocratic assumptions that feedback is neutral, objective, or universally interpreted. Instead, the authors frame feedback as relational identity work shaped by trust, positionality, lived experience, and power.

For scholars and practitioners examining educator growth and professional identity, this discussion is especially resonant. In many educational contexts, feedback systems remain transactional and compliance-oriented, privileging evaluation over reflection. The authors instead position feedback as deeply human work requiring emotional intelligence, cultural responsiveness, and relational awareness. This reframing has important implications for leadership preparation, teacher development, and organizational trust-building within schools.

The discussion of Clutterbuck's (2023) levels of dialogue further strengthens the practical applicability of the text. The framework progresses from social and technical dialogue toward self-insight and behavioral change, suggesting that transformational leadership development requires increasingly reflective forms of conversation. This framework is particularly useful because it highlights how many educational systems remain trapped within technical and tactical dialogue focused on logistics, compliance, and accountability metrics.

Consequently, schools may struggle to cultivate the deeper reflective discourse necessary for organizational transformation. However, the framework may

underestimate the institutional conditions required to sustain higher-order dialogue consistently. Time limitations, accountability structures, and hierarchical leadership cultures often constrain opportunities for authentic reflective engagement within schools. While the framework is conceptually valuable, its implementation may prove difficult within systems that prioritize efficiency over reflection.

Methodologically, the book relies primarily on practitioner examples, conceptual frameworks, and qualitative insights rather than empirical or quantitative analysis. This practitioner-centered approach enhances accessibility and practical relevance for educational leaders and coaches. The inclusion of reflection protocols, coaching tools, and applied scenarios makes the text particularly useful for leadership preparation programs and professional learning contexts.

However, the absence of robust empirical evidence limits the text's scholarly rigor in some respects. The authors advocate persuasively for culturally responsive coaching practices, yet the framework would benefit from stronger longitudinal or mixed-methods evidence demonstrating measurable impacts on leadership effectiveness, school climate, teacher retention, or student outcomes. While practitioner narratives are valuable, empirical validation would strengthen the generalizability of the proposed coaching model and enhance its influence within educational leadership scholarship.

Despite this limitation, *Coaching Education Leaders* succeeds in making a timely and meaningful contribution to conversations surrounding equity-centered leadership development. The text challenges deficit-oriented leadership paradigms and repositions coaching as relational, reflective, and systemically interconnected work. More importantly, the book invites educational leaders to reconsider not only how leadership is practiced, but how leadership identities are formed within systems shaped by inequity, accountability, and organizational complexity.

Ultimately, Gutierrez, Jarney and Kim offer a compelling vision of coaching as transformational rather than transactional. While the text would benefit from deeper empirical grounding and greater interrogation of structural constraints, it provides an important conceptual and practical contribution to contemporary educational leadership discourse. The book is particularly valuable for instructional coaches, school administrators, doctoral students, and leadership preparation programs seeking frameworks that integrate culturally responsive practice with organizational transformation.

Future research should examine how culturally responsive coaching models influence educator identity development, leadership efficacy, organizational trust, and instructional practice over time. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies would be particularly valuable in determining whether equity-centered coaching frameworks produce measurable organizational and student-level outcomes across diverse educational settings.

Reference

Clutterbuck, D. (2023). *Coaching and mentoring: A journey through the models, theories, frameworks and narratives of David Clutterbuck*. Routledge.

About the Reviewer

Doraneesha Jackson is an educator, instructional leader, and doctoral scholar whose work centers on culturally responsive pedagogy, educator feedback, and the intersection of instructional practice and student achievement. With professional experience supporting diverse learners, including emergent bilingual, gifted and talented, and special education populations, her scholarship reflects a deep commitment to equitable teaching practices and transformative educational leadership. Drawing from both classroom experience and academic inquiry, Jackson's work bridges theory and practice by examining how educators adapt instruction to meet the complex and evolving needs of students. This publication reflects her broader commitment to educational research that is both academically rigorous and directly meaningful to classroom practitioners and school leaders.



About the Authors

Nancy B. Gutierrez is President & Lead Executive Officer (LEO) of The Leadership Academy, a nationally recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and developing culturally responsive school and school system leaders to create the conditions necessary for all students to thrive. Prior to joining The Leadership Academy, Nancy launched and led a New York City Department of Education program for executive leadership advancement culminating in superintendent certification. She was named one of the top 100 most influential leaders in education in New York in 2020 by City & State New York. Nancy is a graduate of the inaugural cohort of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.).



Michelle Jarney serves as the Executive Director, Learning and Strategy for The Leadership Academy. In that capacity, she helps lead internal capacity-building efforts, ensuring organizational sustainability and growth. As one of the designers of The Leadership Academy's signature coaching model, Michelle coaches individual leaders and supports clients seeking to develop in-house expertise in leadership coaching. Additionally, she brings her extensive experience as a curriculum designer, facilitator, and consultant to a range of leadership development initiatives in districts throughout the country. Michelle holds an MA from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a BA from Union College.



Michael Kim plays a central role in shaping The Leadership Academy's coaching practice for school, district, and system leaders. He leads design of the organization's educator coach training program, oversees leader and executive coaching, and develops innovative coaching tools and resources to strengthen leadership capacity across systems. Before joining The Leadership Academy, Michael served in AmeriCorps, where he supported a school-based youth services program for a New Jersey high school. During his tenure with AmeriCorps, he also traveled to Mississippi and Louisiana to support relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina. Michael holds a BA in psychology from Rutgers College.

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