
Guest editorial: Mentoring and coaching as pathways to social justice in education

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At this time, as our collective efforts to fix social systems face backlash and, in some cases, aggressive attacks, we must develop new strategies to sustain our work over the years and across generations. We face resistance to socially just systemic changes in our daily conversations with neighbors and other community members, in communities geographically distant from our own that nonetheless shape our daily lives, and among our political leaders who leverage their power to dismantle our collective efforts. For instance, in the United States, attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and on critical race theory specifically have shifted from commentary to legal mandates that prohibit educators in many states from addressing diversity and equity issues, such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity and language-based marginalization (Hoyos Ensuncho, 2025; Schultz, 2025; Woo *et al.*, 2024). Further, both higher education and primary through secondary education are grappling with funding cuts, student health crises, rapidly changing workforce demands and ongoing social and political unrest (Berrett, 2026; Bipartisan Policy Center, 2026; Bryant *et al.*, 2025; Kiley *et al.*, 2026; Langreo, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). New strategies and coalitions are needed to overcome these policy strongholds and social upheavals. We need more scholars to partner with local educators, policymakers and other reformers to continue driving socially just change in primary through secondary education. While we work to alleviate inequities for primary and secondary students, we also strive to amplify the voices of those who are least represented in higher education, both as current and future primary and secondary education leaders and as future scholars. *We need to mentor and coach the next generation of social justice leaders, welcoming and supporting their innovative ideas for change.*

Effective mentors and coaches shepherd mentees and coachees into education spaces with the message “Come right on in. You’re going to do great things here. I’ll walk with you.” They share with their mentees and coachees how to navigate academia, which is often a hostile space for minoritized scholars (Contreras Aguirre, 2024; Maguire *et al.*, 2025; SANCZYK *et al.*, 2021). They guide mentees and coachees in using their unique voices to challenge the dominant body of knowledge and increase social justice advocates’ awareness of self-care practices to sustain themselves and their work. Simultaneously and importantly, mentees and coachees support their mentors’ and coaches’ learning and development as they walk together (Freire, 1993).

Adding to the burgeoning literature on mentoring and coaching for and as and for social justice (Ekpo *et al.*, 2025; Volpe *et al.*, 2025; Wilkerson and James, 2026), this special issue of the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, shepherded by the Leadership for Social Justice (LSJ) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association, aims to offer guidance for mentors, mentees, coaches and coachees as they walk their unique educational journeys together. Our SIG has been assessing the evolution of social justice theory and the presence of social justice practices in teaching, mentoring, coaching and hiring in primary through secondary schools and higher education. While the definition and inclusion of social justice have expanded dramatically in academia (e.g. Sonu *et al.*, 2012; Theoharis, 2007), challenges persist with implementation in primary through secondary schools and school systems (Diamond and Lewis, 2019; Horsford *et al.*, 2019) and in higher education (National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity and Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, 2025; Patton *et al.*, 2010). The collection of articles in this special issue serves as examples of mentoring and coaching for and



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as social justice leadership to cultivate the next generation of scholars who will continue to fight for social justice in primary, secondary and higher education spaces. The authors situate mentoring and coaching within social justice contexts and offer additional nuanced strategies for improving these important relationships.

The articles in this special issue

As the education sector faces renewed challenges to social justice practice, research and theory, mentoring and coaching are critical for supporting the next generation of social justice leaders. The authors in this special issue address the following questions:

- (1) What does social justice mentoring and coaching look like globally, given the various socio-political factors that shape education?
- (2) How can mentoring and coaching models be structured to advance social justice in primary, secondary and higher education settings?
- (3) How are social justice values and practices embedded in and enacted through mentoring and coaching partnerships?
- (4) How can mentoring and coaching partnerships address the personal and professional challenges of social justice leadership?
- (5) How can mentors, coaches, mentees and coachees navigate power dynamics in their relationships?

The authors span the globe, representing various locations in the United States, the United Kingdom, China and Australia. From conceptual papers offering a variety of lenses for creating and understanding social justice work to empirical studies providing frameworks for analysis and application, the authors present a mix of qualitative and mixed-methods studies to ground their contributions.

In their article on coaching school district coaches, [Scanlan et al. \(2026\)](#) share what they learned from their research–practice partnership (RPP) designed to support inclusive practices in elementary and secondary schools. The authors draw on sociocultural learning theory, specifically communities of practice, to conceptualize how five dualities within a learning architecture can guide RPP leaders as they design professional learning opportunities for coaches to support them in implementing inclusive practices with principals, teachers and other school leaders.

[Taylor and Samson \(2026\)](#) examine teacher mentoring relationships and demonstrate how power dynamics within them can nurture or constrain teachers' emerging identities. Grounding the study in Foucault's pastoral power, the researchers conducted a secondary analysis of data from two empirical studies and found that, while teachers would prefer their mentors to help them deeply interrogate their practices along ontological dimensions such as relationality, empathy, passion, commitment and moral purpose, the centrality of regulatory frameworks such as professional standards and performance evaluations can undermine the mentoring relationship to the point that it is defined by compliance. The authors offer a mentoring framework designed to support more equitable mentoring practices.

Investigating the affordances and limitations of peer coaching, [Murdter-Atkinson and Ries \(2026\)](#) highlight the complexities of using peer coaching to help preservice teachers understand, value and enact culturally sustaining pedagogy. In their qualitative case study, the scholars found that peer coaching could be a powerful tool for deepening preservice teachers' understanding and enactment of culturally sustaining pedagogy. However, in some instances, peer coaching was insufficient and even constrained preservice teachers' learning. The authors recommend pairing peer coaching with other supports that may better assist preservice teachers.

In their article examining the current state of faculty mentorship in higher education, [Sánchez Hernández et al. \(2026\)](#) advocate for transnational mentoring networks that serve as safe spaces for faculty members. These spaces exist beyond the borders of a single institution and allow faculty members to set aside the mindsets and pressures of productivity, transactional relationships and individual success embedded in their home institutions and disciplines, enabling them to engage in mentorship with other scholars through mutual learning and dialogue. Using *cartas* and *pláticas* as methods, these scholars examined their own transnational mentoring network to show us how other transnational scholars can create and sustain their own networks.

Exploring transnational mentoring for doctoral students, [Cui et al. \(2026\)](#) examine micro-level power dynamics between expatriate doctoral supervisors and their Chinese supervisees, showing how these interactions shape doctoral students' academic development and emerging scholarly identities. Grounded in a Foucauldian framework and using narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews, the researchers show how more socially just doctoral mentorship does not come from eliminating power asymmetries but from continually and collaboratively negotiating these dynamics as mentor–mentee partners.

Addressing racial inequality and other power imbalances among higher education employees, [Garvey \(2026\)](#) advocates for reverse mentoring, in which minoritized employees mentor senior university leaders as they engage in socially just institutional change. Dr Garvey draws on critical reflexivity about her own experiences as a mentor, anti-racist theory, mentoring scholarship and quotations from anti-racist figures to conceptualize how reverse mentoring can support social justice leadership in academia. This article concludes with detailed recommendations for implementing reverse mentoring within our own institutions, including precautions we must take to avoid causing further harm.

Authors' recommendations to readers

Each article concludes with concrete recommendations that readers can begin implementing immediately in their mentoring and coaching relationships. Instead of spoiling the endings of each article, we highlight common themes across the recommendations here.

First, the authors ask us to push the boundaries of how we conceptualize and operationalize mentoring and coaching. [Sánchez Hernández et al. \(2026\)](#) propose transnational mentoring networks as (un)anchored academic safe spaces and define their mentoring space as one that moves away from self-interest and academic borders toward a space that nurtures genuine academic and intellectual inquiry, grounded in social justice principles. [Cui et al. \(2026\)](#) ask us to reconceptualize transnational doctoral mentoring from a fixed arrangement to a relational, dynamic one embedded in institutional, cultural and epistemic conditions. Similarly, [Murdter-Atkinson and Ries \(2026\)](#) found in their study of a peer coaching model for preservice teachers that becoming a culturally sustaining literacy teacher is not a linear process but a dynamic one that requires multiple learning opportunities across coursework and field placements. [Scanlan et al. \(2026\)](#) share their learning as leaders of a research–practice partnership focused on implementing inclusive practices and offer a social justice leadership framework that supports coaches in reflecting on technical and relational dynamics within their communities of practice. [Garvey \(2026\)](#) redefines mentoring in higher education by flipping it on its head and positing reverse mentoring for racial equality as a promising model to foster anti-racist leadership among senior university leaders. [Taylor and Samson \(2026\)](#) analyze the power dynamics inherent in teacher mentoring relationships and ask us to reconceptualize teacher mentoring, moving away from allowing regulatory structures such as professional teaching standards to govern mentoring relationships toward mentoring relationships that truly support mentees' emerging identities as great teachers.

Some authors also offer recommendations for moderating power dynamics between mentors and mentees. One of the most striking recommendations comes from [Garvey \(2026\)](#), who advocates radically changing the roles of mentor and mentee so that the person with the least

institutional power – in this case, minoritized employees – serves as the mentor guiding the mentee – senior university leaders – in challenging racial inequalities in universities. [Cui et al.'s \(2026\)](#) findings from their study of cross-cultural doctoral supervision suggest that socially just doctoral mentorship does not arise from eliminating power asymmetries but from ongoing negotiation between mentor and mentee. [Taylor and Samson \(2026\)](#) suggest moderating power dynamics by having mentors and mentees collaboratively design their relationship and jointly engage in critical self-examination and critical storytelling about their mentoring relationship.

Finally, some authors address the need for institutional support and offer detailed recommendations on what that support might entail. In their respective articles, [Garvey \(2026\)](#) and [Cui et al. \(2026\)](#) advocate for carefully designed, ongoing professional learning opportunities for mentors and mentees alike. Garvey also provides guidance on designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating reverse mentoring initiatives at our own institutions. Institutions that invest in effective mentoring contribute to both faculty and institutional well-being ([National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity and Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, 2025](#)).

An invitation to readers

In a social and political climate in which social justice educators and scholars must resist persistent challenges to their curriculum and research, this special issue seeks to support mentoring and coaching as and for social justice leadership in higher education and primary through secondary education spaces, serving the next generation of educators and scholars who will continue to fight for socially just systemic changes. The special issue expands the literature on social justice mentoring and coaching by providing practical, actionable insights for mentors/coaches and their mentees. We invite you to immerse yourself in these authors' stories and their recommendations. We also invite you to apply some of their recommendations in your institutions and in your current mentoring and coaching relationships. You can begin another wave of socially just systemic change with your daily practices.

Finally, we would like to honor our dear colleague Dr Daniel Moraguez, who was and remains an exceptional mentor and friend. The editors are among the few who knew that one of his papers was under review for this special issue. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete his draft before he passed. We want to take this opportunity to honor him and his research on social justice leadership and on preparing social justice-oriented primary and secondary educational leaders. We miss you every day, Danny.

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Dr Lok-Sze Wong, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of North Texas, studies system reform policies as attempts to address systemic inequities. Drawing on education,

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Dr LaSonja Roberts, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University, studies leader preparation and retention, specifically the use of appreciative leadership to create environments that foster learning and well-being for educators and students, emphasizing equity and inclusion practices that are essential to learning and well-being. She uses *Theatre of the Oppressed* for research and professional development with pre-kindergarten through Grade 20 (P-20) educators and community leaders. Dr Roberts has had the privilege of serving as a teacher, administrator, and district and university consultant in California, Mississippi, and Florida. She received her PhD from the University of South Florida and currently teaches leadership and dissertation courses in the Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology Department, as well as a Theatre for Social Change class for education and theatre majors.

Dr Leah P. Hollis, Professor of Education at The Pennsylvania State University, has an extensive career in higher education administration and has held senior leadership and faculty posts. Dr Hollis has taught at Northeastern University, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and Rutgers University. Dr Hollis received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Africana Studies from Rutgers University and her Master of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Pittsburgh. She earned her Doctorate of Education from Boston University as a Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellow. Additionally, Dr Hollis continued her professional training at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education through its Higher Education Management Development Program. She earned certifications in Project Management and Executive Leadership at Stanford University and Cornell University, respectively. Hollis is also the recipient of the 2024 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Social Justice Award.

Dr Frank Hernandez, Dean of the College of Education at Texas Christian University, is a scholar, educator, and advocate whose work sits at the intersection of educational leadership, Latinx equity, and teacher development and preparation. His research examines the experiences of historically underrepresented communities in K–12 and higher education, with particular attention to the roles that identity, language, and culture play in shaping educational opportunity. Drawing on his own experience as both a kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) teacher and administrator, Dr Hernandez brings a practitioner's perspective to questions of systemic equity and school improvement. He is committed to centering the voices of those most often excluded from dominant narratives in education – including, most recently, through his co-leadership of scholarship on the experiences of Hispanic male teachers in Texas public schools. Dr Hernandez earned his PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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