

Beyond the Numbers: Navigating Barriers and Leveraging Data for Transformative Educational Leadership in Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals

Zhila Jaime Moore-Vego

University of Perpetual Help System DALTA – Graduate School, Las Piñas City, Philippines

zhilavego@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how educational leaders navigated systemic barriers and harnessed data to advance transformative, equitable, and sustainable educational leadership. A qualitative descriptive design under an interpretivist paradigm was employed at Branchville High School in the Orangeburg County School District, South Carolina, USA. Eight school administrators were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in data-informed decision-making, instructional leadership, policy implementation, and equity-related initiatives. Data were generated through approximately 60-minute semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Analysis integrated Colaizzi's phenomenological procedures for identifying significant statements and formulated meanings with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis for coding, clustering, reviewing, and defining themes. Credibility was strengthened through

member checking, peer debriefing, reflexivity, and an audit trail. Three interconnected themes emerged: leading transformative change through student-centered decision-making, collaboration, and continuous improvement; ethical and responsive leadership through data-informed service, equity, collaboration, and student-centered decision-making; and integrating relational ethics, responsibility, and data-informed leadership for equitable and responsive educational practice. The findings showed that leaders treated data as meaningful only when interpreted within students' lived realities, stakeholder relationships, and ethical responsibilities. The study culminated in the C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework, which integrates collaborative partnerships, accountability and attentiveness, reflective and responsible data use, inclusive learning communities, and sustainable innovation. The study concludes that ethical, relational, and evidence-informed leadership can strengthen equitable school improvement and advance Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Keywords: *data-driven leadership, transformative educational leadership, relational ethics, educational equity, sustainable development goals, school improvement*

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership increasingly operates at the intersection of accountability, equity, technological change, and sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education, yet persistent disparities in access, resources, participation, and outcomes require school leaders to move beyond routine administration toward evidence-informed and context-responsive improvement. Collaborative and equity-oriented leadership has been identified as essential to quality education, while data-

informed leadership enables schools to identify inequities, monitor progress, and target resources more strategically (Education International, 2024; Leithwood, 2021; Adanne, 2024).

The promise of data, however, does not guarantee equitable outcomes. Leaders must interpret evidence within the realities of students, staff, families, and communities, and they must cultivate organizational conditions in which data can be used responsibly. Research on data-informed cultures emphasizes the importance of trust, professional learning, shared goals, collaboration, and accessible systems, while also identifying barriers such as limited time, insufficient data literacy, resistance, fragmented technologies, and weak organizational support (Datnow & Park, 2021; Marsh & Farrell, 2021; Jimerson & Wayman, 2022; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2021). Ethical questions concerning privacy, consent, bias, and the misuse of data further complicate leadership decisions (Hakimi et al., 2021; Mandinach & Jimerson, 2022).

These tensions are especially relevant in diverse and rural school contexts such as Branchville High School in the Orangeburg County School District, South Carolina, where leaders must respond to differences in student preparedness, attendance, resource access, instructional needs, and community circumstances. The study therefore focused on how school administrators used data while remaining attentive to relational ethics, responsibility, stakeholder voice, equity, and the social and technical conditions shaping school improvement. This localized inquiry responds to calls for context-sensitive research on how data practices become embedded in leadership and how such practices can support sustainable and inclusive transformation (Bush-Mecenas, 2024; Chigbu & Makapela, 2025; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2025).

The study sought to understand the lived experiences of school leaders as they navigated barriers and opportunities in transformative leadership; derive meanings from their accounts of ethical and responsive data use; identify themes concerning the integration of relationships, responsibility, data, and technology; and develop a leadership framework grounded in the findings. In doing so, it aimed to bridge the gap between technical data use and human-centered leadership, offering a practical basis for school improvement that aligns local leadership practice with broader commitments to equity, inclusion, and sustainable development.

Literature Review

Data-driven leadership for equity and systemic improvement

Data use has become central to contemporary school improvement because it enables leaders to identify patterns of inequity, assess intervention effectiveness, and make decisions that are more responsive to learner needs. Bush-Mecenas (2024) describes continuous improvement as a mechanism through which leaders can transform data from a compliance requirement into an equity-focused tool, while Adanne (2024) reports a positive association between data-driven leadership and school effectiveness. Datnow and Park (2023) similarly argue that leading for equity requires purposeful use of evidence to identify barriers experienced by marginalized learners and to direct action toward measurable improvement.

Equity-oriented data use also requires leaders to consider multiple forms of evidence. Wilcox et al. (2021) show that data-based decision-making can support inclusive educational practice when it is linked to evidence-based interventions, while Chigbu and Makapela (2025) connect data-driven leadership to inclusive transformation and the Sustainable Development Goals. At the policy level, UNESCO (2023) and Tibbitts et al. (2023) position leadership, collaboration, and evidence use as important mechanisms for advancing quality education and sustainable institutional development.

Data-informed culture, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement

Sustained data use depends on organizational culture rather than technical access alone. Datnow and Park (2021) emphasize leadership and professional learning as foundations for equitable data use, while Marsh and Farrell (2021) argue that leaders must cultivate cultures in which evidence is discussed openly, interpreted collectively, and connected to improvement priorities. Jimerson and Wayman (2022) further identify infrastructure, clear protocols, and shared goals as organizational supports that allow data use to become systematic rather than episodic.

Collaboration is particularly important because educational data rarely explain themselves. Farrell and Marsh (2022) highlight trust and collaborative relationships as conditions that enable educators to examine evidence honestly and constructively. Poortman et al. (2021) likewise demonstrate the value of data teams in strengthening collective responsibility, distributed expertise, and sustained improvement. These perspectives suggest that stakeholder participation, communication, and shared accountability are not secondary to data use; they are essential to interpreting evidence in ways that are contextually meaningful and ethically defensible.

Data literacy, technology, and ethical data use

Data literacy is a critical leadership capacity because evidence can only guide improvement when educators are able to access, interpret, question, and apply it. Lee et al. (2024) conceptualize teacher data literacy as a multidimensional competence involving interpretation and application, while Schildkamp and Poortman (2021) identify professional development, leadership commitment, and accessible systems as factors that promote effective data-based decision-making. At the same time, rapidly changing technologies can generate overload, fragmentation, and uneven access, requiring leaders to balance innovation with realistic organizational capacity (Krein & Schiefner-Rohs, 2021).

Ethical data use introduces additional responsibilities. Hakimi et al. (2021) identify privacy, consent, and data security as recurring concerns in educational data practices, and Mandinach and Jimerson (2022) frame data ethics as a practical and policy issue rather than a purely theoretical one. Murchan and Siddiq (2021) similarly call attention to the need for transparent governance and accountability. Consequently, data-informed leadership must be both analytically competent and ethically grounded, ensuring that information supports students without reducing them to numbers or reproducing inequities.

Theoretical grounding and conceptual framework

The study was grounded in three complementary perspectives. The Ethics of Care emphasizes relational responsibility and attentiveness to the needs of others (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Transformational Leadership Theory explains how leaders mobilize shared purpose, motivation, and organizational change (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). Socio-Technical Systems Theory highlights the interdependence of people, organizational culture, technology, and work processes, emphasizing that technical systems are effective only when aligned with the social context in which they operate (Trist & Bamforth, 1951).

Together, these perspectives frame data-informed leadership as a human and organizational process rather than a purely technical one. Ethical care directs attention to student welfare and stakeholder voice; transformational leadership explains how values and shared goals can mobilize improvement; and socio-technical thinking clarifies why data systems, technologies, and policies must be aligned with institutional relationships and capacities. The dissertation's theme map visually consolidates these interrelated dimensions and is retained below as the study's conceptual/thematic framework for the journal article.

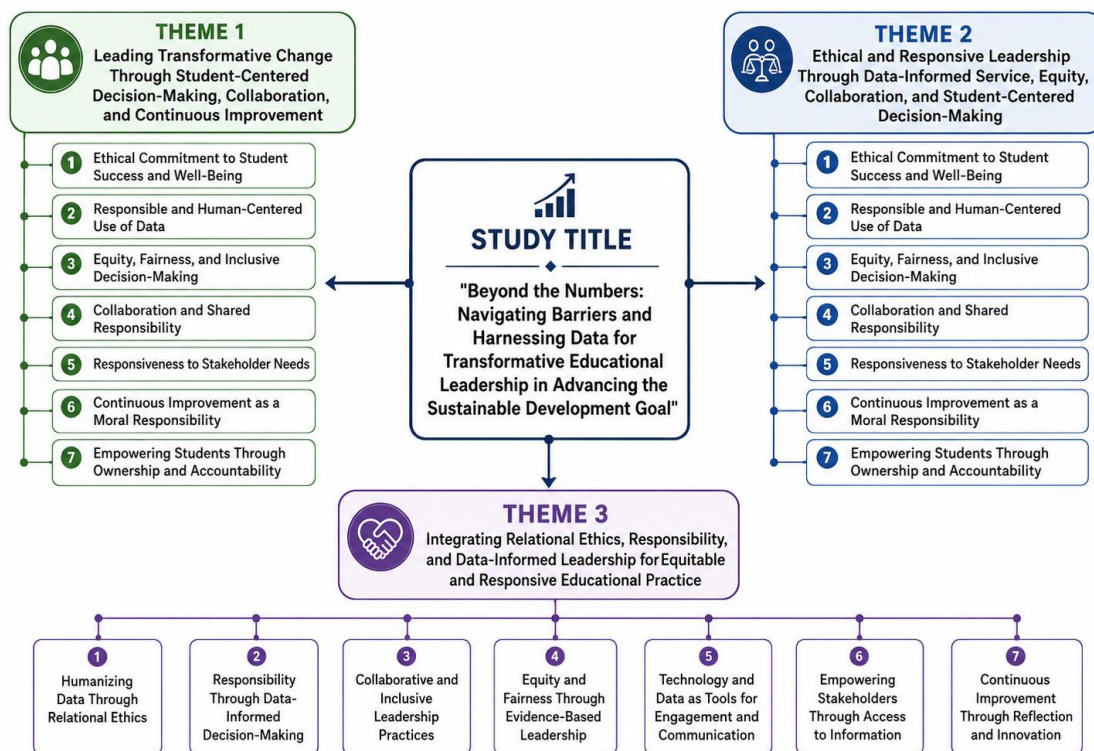


Figure 1. *Theme Mapping of Transformative Educational Leadership, Data Use, and Equity (retained from the dissertation).*

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design under an interpretivist paradigm. The design was appropriate because the inquiry sought detailed, context-based accounts of how educational leaders experienced, interpreted, and responded to data use, equity concerns, institutional barriers, and transformative leadership. Rather than testing causal relationships, the study examined meanings, practices, ethical considerations, and leadership responses embedded in the participants' narratives.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Branchville High School in the Orangeburg County School District in South Carolina, USA. The district serves students from Branchville, Orangeburg, Neeses, Cordova, Lake Marion, and surrounding rural communities. The setting was selected because its diverse demographic and socioeconomic conditions, data-informed improvement efforts, and ongoing attention to equity provided a relevant context for examining the interaction of leadership, evidence use, and sustainable school improvement.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Eight school administrators were selected through purposive sampling. Participants occupied leadership positions involving data-informed decision-making, instructional leadership, policy implementation, and equity-related initiatives. Eligibility required at least one year of experience in a current leadership role within the Orangeburg County School District. Variation in leadership roles and professional experience was considered to capture multiple perspectives on how data and relational responsibilities were negotiated in practice.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol informed by the research questions, theoretical perspectives, and related literature. Open-ended questions addressed data-driven leadership, systemic barriers, equity-oriented practice, ethical considerations, stakeholder engagement, technology use, and strategies for educational improvement. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to probe for clarification and obtain detailed descriptions while maintaining consistency across interviews.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher secured institutional permission and obtained informed consent before each interview. The eight participants were interviewed individually for approximately 60 minutes in private settings conducive to open discussion. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Although focus groups and observations had initially been considered, they were not conducted because of participant scheduling constraints; therefore, semi-structured interviews served as the study's primary qualitative data source. Transcripts were reviewed against the recordings, identifying information was removed, and files were stored securely.

Data Analysis

Analysis integrated Colaizzi's phenomenological procedures and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts, identified significant statements related to the research questions, and developed formulated meanings while retaining contextual links to the original accounts. The formulated meanings were then coded, compared, clustered, reviewed, and refined into broader patterns and themes following the systematic logic of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive notes, and an audit trail were used to strengthen credibility and analytical transparency, consistent with qualitative trustworthiness principles (Nowell & Norris, 2021).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical safeguards included institutional permission, voluntary participation, written informed consent, confidentiality, use of pseudonyms, and the right to decline questions or withdraw without penalty. Audio recordings, transcripts, and related files were secured on password-protected devices with access restricted to the researcher. The dissertation also included documentation for informed consent and ethical clearance. Participants were informed of potential discomfort associated with discussing institutional challenges and were offered a summary of the completed study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis generated three interconnected themes that captured how school leaders balanced evidence, relationships, ethical responsibility, technology, and continuous improvement. Rather than treating data use as a technical routine, participants described leadership as a process of interpreting evidence through the lived realities of students and stakeholders. Table 1 summarizes the three overarching themes and their principal clusters.

Table 1. *Synthesis of the Emergent Themes*

Overarching theme	Principal theme clusters
1. Leading transformative change through student-centered decision-making, collaboration, and continuous improvement	Student success and holistic support; data-guided decisions; collaboration and shared responsibility; stakeholder responsiveness; reflection and continuous improvement; student ownership and accountability.
2. Ethical and responsive leadership through data-informed service, equity, collaboration, and student-centered decision-making	Ethical commitment to student well-being; responsible and human-centered use of data; equity and inclusive decision-making; collaborative service; contextual interpretation of evidence; responsiveness to barriers in data use.

3. Integrating relational ethics, responsibility, and data-informed leadership for equitable and responsive educational practice	Humanizing data; responsibility through evidence-informed decisions; collaborative and inclusive leadership; equity and fairness; technology for engagement and communication; stakeholder empowerment; continuous improvement through reflection and innovation.
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Leading transformative change through student-centered decision-making, collaboration, and continuous improvement

The first theme showed that participants placed student success, attendance, engagement, well-being, graduation readiness, and future opportunities at the center of leadership. Data were valued because they helped leaders identify students needing support and direct attention toward academic, social, emotional, and developmental barriers. One participant stated that without data leaders would be “lost,” underscoring its role in identifying risk and monitoring progress. Yet the leaders did not treat records as complete explanations; they combined attendance, performance, behavior, and everyday observations to understand the circumstances behind student outcomes.

Collaboration strengthened this student-centered orientation. Participants described exchanging ideas, involving multiple departments, consulting teachers, and engaging families and community stakeholders. Shared analysis helped leaders consider academic, behavioral, emotional, and organizational perspectives rather than making isolated judgments. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing that effective data cultures depend on trust, collaboration, distributed expertise, and collective responsibility (Farrell & Marsh, 2022; Poortman et al., 2021).

Continuous improvement completed the theme. Leaders described revisiting decisions, examining what had or had not worked, and adjusting programs, professional learning, and interventions. This reflective stance mirrors continuous-improvement scholarship in which evidence is repeatedly used to identify needs, test responses, and refine practice (Bush-Mecenas, 2024). Transformative leadership therefore emerged as an iterative process in which data, stakeholder knowledge, and reflection were integrated around student needs.

Ethical and responsive leadership through data-informed service, equity, collaboration, and student-centered decision-making

The second theme framed data use as an ethical responsibility. Participants used attendance records, achievement indicators, longitudinal patterns, and other evidence to guide support and reduce dependence on assumptions. At the same time, they emphasized that numerical patterns required contextual interpretation because low performance or attendance could reflect family obligations, emotional concerns, transportation issues, resource limitations, mobility, or disengagement. This combination of evidence and contextual understanding reflects the ethical caution identified in the literature: data can illuminate inequity, but interpretation must remain attentive to privacy, fairness, and the circumstances of the people represented (Hakimi et al., 2021; Mandinach & Jimerson, 2022).

Equity was understood as responsiveness rather than identical treatment. Leaders sought to ensure that stakeholder voices were heard, that students received support appropriate to their circumstances, and that decision-making did not privilege a single perspective. Participants also described helping students understand their own attendance, achievement, and progress data so that information could become a source of agency rather than judgment. Such practices align with equity-focused data use in which evidence is employed to identify disparities, personalize support, and strengthen participation (Datnow & Park, 2023; Wilcox et al., 2021).

The theme also revealed practical barriers. Participant accounts referred to time constraints, changing systems, student transfers, incomplete information, and uneven access to data as conditions that could impede timely decisions. These barriers support research showing that data-based decision-making depends on organizational capacity, accessible systems, and sustained professional support (Jimerson & Wayman, 2022; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2021). Ethical responsiveness therefore required both individual leadership competence and institutional conditions that enabled reliable, understandable, and usable evidence.

Integrating relational ethics, responsibility, and data-informed leadership for equitable and responsive educational practice

The third theme integrated the human and technical dimensions of leadership. Participants repeatedly emphasized that “there are faces behind the data” and that evidence represents students’ actual experiences rather than abstract metrics. Relationships, empathy, communication, and stakeholder knowledge helped leaders understand why patterns appeared, while data enabled them to identify needs, monitor interventions, and evaluate outcomes. This integration reflects the study’s Ethics of Care and socio-technical framing: meaningful leadership depends on both attentiveness to people and alignment of systems, tools, processes, and organizational relationships.

Technology functioned as both an analytical and relational resource. Leaders described using data systems to monitor progress, communicate goals, engage families, and make information more visible to students and staff. However, participants also recognized that technology could not replace professional judgment, communication, or ethical responsibility. This finding parallels scholarship cautioning that technical solutions can reproduce blind spots when they are detached from context and stakeholder voice (Krein & Schiefner-Rohs, 2021) and that sustainable data use requires a culture in which evidence is interpreted collaboratively (Marsh & Farrell, 2021).

Across the three themes, relational ethics and data-informed leadership were complementary rather than competing approaches. Data helped leaders see patterns; relationships helped them understand the human conditions behind those patterns; and responsibility connected evidence to action. The resulting leadership practice was student-centered, collaborative, equitable, reflective, and responsive to institutional realities. These findings provided the basis for the study’s practical output, the C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework.

C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework as the practical output

The C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework—Collaborative and Adaptive Relational Ethics for Sustainable Leadership—translated the findings into five interconnected leadership components: Cultivate Collaborative Partnerships; Act with Accountability and Attentiveness; Respond through Reflective and Responsible Data Use; Empower Inclusive and Equitable Learning Communities; and Sustain Innovation and Systemic Improvement. Student success occupies the center of the framework, emphasizing holistic development, equity, well-being, and lifelong learning. The model also links the study to SDG 4, SDG 10, SDG 16, and SDG 17 by connecting quality education, reduced inequalities, ethical institutions, and partnerships.

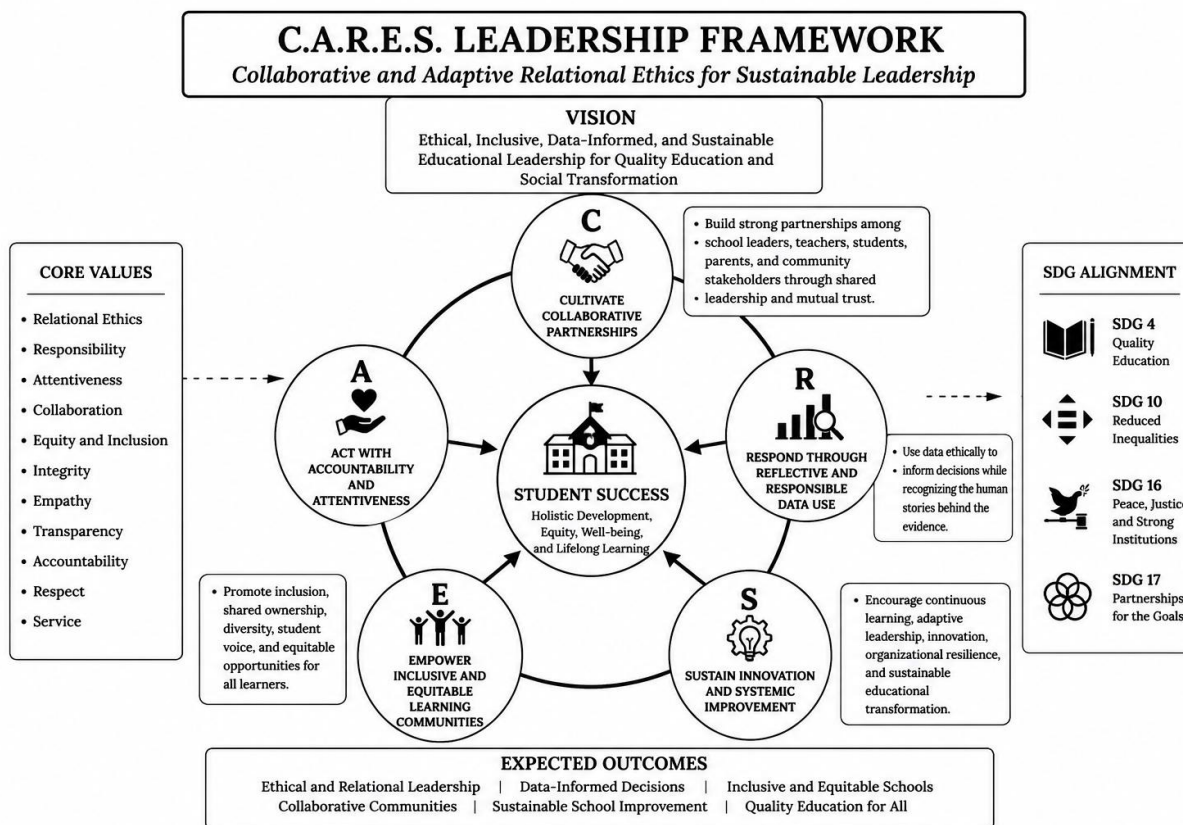


Figure 2. C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework: Collaborative and Adaptive Relational Ethics for Sustainable Leadership.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that transformative educational leadership in a data-rich environment is neither purely technical nor purely relational. Effective leaders used evidence to identify needs and evaluate progress, but they interpreted those data through relationships, professional judgment, ethical responsibility, and knowledge of students' lived circumstances. Across the three themes, student-centeredness, collaboration, equity, stakeholder responsiveness, reflection, and continuous improvement consistently shaped the meaning of responsible data use. The findings therefore support an integrated view of leadership in which relationships humanize evidence and evidence strengthens accountability.

The principal contribution of the study is the C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework, which consolidates the participants' experiences into a practical model for collaborative, accountable, reflective, inclusive, and sustainable leadership. The framework suggests that school improvement is strengthened when leaders cultivate partnerships, remain attentive to stakeholders, use data responsibly, empower equitable participation, and sustain organizational learning. In this way, the study contributes a context-grounded approach to educational leadership that aligns local school improvement with the broader aims of quality, equity, and sustainable development.

Recommendation

Educational leaders may use the C.A.R.E.S. Leadership Framework to structure school improvement planning, leadership development, professional learning, and stakeholder engagement. District and school leaders should strengthen data literacy while simultaneously developing relational capacities such as empathy, communication, collaborative inquiry, and ethical judgment. Data systems should be made accessible and stable,

but leaders should also establish processes that help teachers, students, and families interpret information constructively, protect confidentiality, and connect quantitative indicators with contextual knowledge.

Leadership preparation programs and policy frameworks may incorporate responsible data use, collaborative governance, equity, and relational ethics as complementary competencies. Future research should validate the C.A.R.E.S. framework in urban, suburban, rural, private, and international settings and may employ quantitative, mixed-methods, or longitudinal designs to examine its association with organizational resilience, school improvement, stakeholder engagement, and student outcomes. Further inquiry may also examine how artificial intelligence, digital transformation, and emerging data systems influence the ethical and human dimensions of educational leadership.

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